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THE MAN OF SILK



BY JOSEPH E. BADGER, JR.

"IF YOU STILL DOUBT, TAKE MY GUNS AND RUN ME IN SO QUICK IT'LL MAKE MY HEAD SWIM!"

The Man of Silk;

OR,

LITTLE PUSS,

THE PRIDE OF POSEY'S POCKET.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,

AUTHOR OF "NOR'-WEST NICK," "MONTE JIM,"
ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A NOVEL PAIR OF SNUFFERS.

"STIDDY, thar! 'Have yourself, Old Rocks!'" And Hungry Derrick tightened the sagging ribbons with a touch that only long experience could attain. "Quit your foolishness, I tell ye! There ain't nothin' any uglier than your own shadder 'lithin a mile o' ye, an' I know it!"

Still the veteran off-wheeler crowded the pole, its muscles quivering, its nostrils dilating with quick, tremulous sniffs, its ears pricked forward, its lustrous eyes filled with suspicious fright. Sharper and truer than human reason was its instinct!

Another sidelong plunge that shook the dusty coach until there came a short, terrified cry from the interior, and Hungry Derrick shot forward his silk-tipped lash with impatient emphasis, although it was skillfully arrested before the sleek hide of his well-beloved wheeler was desecrated. Sharp rung the cracker, but sharper still—

Crack!

All in a heap Old Rocks, the veteran wheeler, went down; sharp and spiteful rung forth the death-shot, rebounding from the rugged rocks beyond, multiplied into a score before the echoes died away down the narrow valley.

Blending with that report came the stern command:

"Down brakes and hold her level, Hungry, or you go to keep that brute company!"

This was not the first time Hungry Derrick had been "held up" by road-raiders, and though his heart was full to overflowing with grief at the untimely fate of Old Rocks, he promptly cried:

"Down brakes it am, an' be durned to ye!"

"Business, lads! You know your duty!" added the same stern voice from behind the leafy shelter, ringing out sharper and clearer as the man and horse forced a passage through the bushes and entered the coach-trail, one hand covering the driver with a heavy revolver, while its mate menaced the occupants of the stage. "I've got you lined, inside and out! It's metal I'm after, but blood won't scare me, if you will have it that way!"

Two black-masked men leaped to the heads of the lead horses, holding them steady with practiced hands. A third, making a stepping-stone of the quivering Old Rocks, leaped upon the surviving wheeler, active and sure as a monkey, steadying the terrified creature. Another trio moved so as to command the open window of the stage-door, each masked figure holding a Winchester repeater ready for instant use.

"No monkeying inside there!" cried the masked chief, as his keen eyes noted swift movements through the open window. "Let down the bars, Cupid, and if the pilgrims do any kicking, you'll have plenty of company on the road to glory!"

"Don't shoot; there's a lady in here!" came a slightly tremulous voice from the interior.

"That's all right. A lady she may remain, unless you fellows kick up a bobbery; then she'll turn to an angel, ripe for glory! Business is business with gentlemen of our calling, and—all right, Cupid?"

"Ke-rect way bill, boss!" promptly replied Cupid, the masked outlaw, with a quick glance through the stage. "One petticoat, two men-critters."

"Open up, and turn them out, then! Lively, now!"

Cupid swung the door open, reaching inside and making a grasp at the shrinking, pale-faced woman, but the younger male passenger foiled his intention, backing out of the stage and half-carrying, half-supporting the lady. His face was pale and bloodless, but there was a touch of desperation in his dark eyes as they met those of the road-agent.

"Hands off! Don't you see the poor child is frightened almost to death? Abuse us as much as you like, but spare her, at least!" he muttered, hoarsely.

Cupid glanced over his shoulder toward the mounted outlaw, a: though in doubt.

"I'll look after them. Tumble out the old gent, Cupid; but don't rack his aged bones too rough, at first."

"Spare him—my husband!" hysterically gasped the lady, breaking loose from the young man and springing back to the stage, through the door of which could be seen a tall, white-haired man. "Do not harm him! He is ill—he is—my darling!" with a choking sob as Cupid involuntarily gave way.

In an instant one arm was about the neck of the old man, and she was assisting him to

alight. As they stood beside the coach, even the masked rider seemed struck by the picture thus presented.

Tall and gaunt, with a frame that had once been powerful and muscular in the extreme, but now bowed and bent with the weight of sorrow far more than of years, Darius Aymer really seemed to require the support lent him by that slight, almost frail figure. Her slender arm had slipped from his neck down to his waist. Her other hand clasped one of his, as though to lend him courage. And yet, Adine Aymer looked more like a child, as the third passenger had called her, than the wife of an old man like this.

Slender, almost fragile in build, with the crown of her bonnet hardly rising to the level of his bent shoulders; with a small, childish face, pink and white like that of the child she seemed; with a babyish mouth, even now red and pouting, despite its slight quivering; with wide-open eyes of deepest, purest blue, fringed with long, flaxen lashes—eyes that were filled with a curious blending of defiance, fear and pleading.

For a brief space the masked rider sat in his saddle, gazing from face to face, but his dark eyes lingering longest on that of Adine Aymer. Like many a better man, he seemed to find a strange fascination in that girlish face.

He flung back his cowed head with an impatient gesture, his voice sounding hard and sneering as he spoke again:

"Very pretty, on my honor! A delightful tableau, but—isn't it a case of swapping babies?"

The last words were flung at the other passenger, whose dark brows contracted still more, a dangerous light leaping suddenly into the black eyes.

"Get through your dirty work as soon as you can, though it's precious little you'll find for your trouble. And if there's anything of the man about you, spare her further needless insult."

"Sits the wind in that quarter?" mockingly laughed the outlaw. "May and December, with ardent June hovering near! Well, such is life in the Far West!"

"Brother—dear brother!" faltered Adine, shrinking back from the gaze of the chief with a little shiver. "Do not anger him, for—"

"For your charming sake, madam, he may empty an entire Dictionary on my devoted head, and I'll only smile sweetly upon him in return," cried the outlaw, bowing low. "As your brother he is sacred, unless he should be foolish enough to try to jump the game with a stake left in his pocket; that would be the last straw, sure enough!"

"Then you won't—you don't mean to—"

"To swallow you without salt?" laughed the road-raider, lightly. "A delicious morsel, no doubt, but it isn't my time of day for feeding, you see!"

He cut his mocking speech short, for Adine apparently did not hear his words. She turned to Darius Aymer, her arms locked about his neck, her baby face hid in his bosom, sobbing, laughing, on the verge of hysterics.

"It is true—I saw it in his eyes!" she uttered, brokenly. "It is not so bad. What is a little money, to your life? And that is safe! You said that?" turning swiftly toward the masked rider, smiles and tears chasing each other over her childish face in curious fashion. "You will not harm him? He is so ill—so very ill! You will spare him, even if we have to suffer?"

"Can't he talk for himself?" sharply demanded the masked chief.

Something in his tone seemed to sting Darius Aymer, for his tall figure rose erect, and a slight tinge of color came into his thin, worn face.

"What is there to say to such rascals as—"

Adine swiftly pressed her little hands over his thin lips, sobbing like one half distracted, now imploring her husband to be calm, now turning to beg the masked rider's forbearance, her speech hardly articulate enough for reproducing.

"That's all right," impatiently uttered the outlaw, with a wave of his gloved right hand. "I only wanted to see if he had a tongue behind his lips, for I began to fear we had made a mistake in our game."

He turned to Bush Clark, the third passenger, adding:

"Quiet the lady, if you know how. This is growing rather monotonous. She'll suffer nothing worse than the loss of her pin-money. Keep an eye on them, Cupid, and copper any little tricks they may try to play when my back's turned."

He wheeled his horse and glanced up at the driver who was sitting quietly on his seat, both hands raised above his head in regulation style, though his gaze was bent upon the now motionless form of his favorite wheel-horse.

"Still mourning over your lost darling, Derrick?" mockingly asked the chief. "I admire your constancy, but time enough for cutting out your mourning suit after business-hours. Think you can come down to a common level?"

"What more do ye want?" growled the driv-

er, with a sullen glow in his eyes. "I'm holdin' up all right, I reckon?"

"I want you to bear in mind that I can shoot a man just as easily as I shot your horse. I don't want to waste a bullet on game that is good for neither stomach nor pocket, but if you will have it that way, I can snuff out your light without so much as a wink."

"It's toss-up which I'd rather see shot, me or my hoss!"

"It can be both if you insist upon it, Hungry!"

"Ef it's all the same to you, boss, I'd rather live long enough to see you pull hemp," grinned the driver.

"Coming 'round a little, ain't ye?" laughed the rider. "All right. Jump down and look after your team. Give the boys your guns, and hand 'em out butt first, if you please. Not that I think you'd try any monkey-work, but I'm opposed to throwing temptation in any one's way."

"Sha'n't I throw the treasure-box at ye, fu'st?"

"Don't try to be sharp, Hungry; sarcasm isn't your forte, so to speak. Don't we all know you're too honest to be trusted with corporation valuables?"

"A body cain't always tell," muttered Derrick, unbuckling his belt and tossing it to the ground. "You brung sech a army with ye I didn't know but ye was new to the route, an' tuck me fer express, messenger, guards an' all, rolled up into one package!"

"Which package will be punched full of holes if you don't roll off that box right lively!" was the sharp reminder.

Derrick, good enough judge of human nature to know when to act instead of talk, promptly jumped to the ground, deftly unhooking the frightened wheeler and setting it free from its dead mate.

"One of you fellows can keep an eye on Hungry, just to make sure he don't try to surround and capture the gang while we're collecting the fare," laughed the chief, quitting the saddle for the first time.

He turned to the three passengers, who were standing side by side, under guard. A glance showed him that the lady had, in part, recovered from her fright; that Bush Clark was grave and stern; that Darius Aymer had "braced up" wonderfully, standing erect, composed and dignified.

"If you could see beneath this sable covering, dear madam, you would realize something of my shame at having to act the part of a robber knight. If my blushes do not set my mask afire it isn't because they are not hot."

"Since we are obliged to listen, may we sit down to rest until you are through?" sneered Clark.

The taunt stung, evidently.

"I'll sit you down for good and all, my fine fellow, unless you put a bridle on that clapper of yours!" he cried, sharply. "It's an ugly mug you carry over those broad shoulders, and I've half concluded the future may be smoother if you are planted too deep to sprout!"

"Spare him! He didn't mean to offend you!" tremblingly murmured Adine, one little hand stretched out appealingly, the other clinging to her husband. "Take our little all, but spare our lives!"

"Oh, quit. You make me tired," drawled the outlaw, insolently, fanning his masked face with a gloved hand. "Do you take us for tenderfeet, out for an airing? Your little all! Bless your stars that that same little all is as much as I know it to be!"

"There's my contribution, and may each dollar of it go to buy the rope that is to hang you!" grated Clark, drawing a thin wallet from his bosom and casting it at the feet of the chief.

"Small favors thankfully received, and larger ones in proportion," mockingly retorted the rascal, but making no move toward picking up the pocket-book. "I see you prefer the searching process."

"I don't object to it, in this case, since you'll have only your labor for your pains," was the cold retort.

"Time will show. I know there's heap more ducats in the party than such a consumptive receptacle can accommodate. Perhaps you are the moneyed member of the firm?" turning toward Darius Aymer.

"May the curse of a broken-hearted father upon a dishonored son cling to every dollar of it!" uttered the old man, his trembling right hand holding forth a pocketbook not much more plethoric-looking than the one given up by Bush Clark. "With it goes my last hopes—"

The masked outlaw gave a visible start at the first sentence.

"What! you claim me as your son? Bah!" with an abrupt change of voice and manner. "That won't wash! In business hours I never recognize relations. And, right now, I'm business clear over my boot-tops! Come down with the ducats, or out goes your light, old man!" and he strode forward until his pistol-arm reached the breast of the old man. The heavy revolver was cocked and a gloved finger rested on the trigger. The dark eyes behind the sable mask seemed to flash fire.

"Don't—don't murder—"

Her voice broke, but Adine caught the muzzle of the pistol, her palm closing over the bore. With a deft motion the chief freed the weapon, his thumb dropping on the hammer as though afraid the pistol might be accidentally discharged.

"Take her aside, you!" with an ugly look at Bush Clark. "I've wasted time enough on her nonsense. It's for her sake I bid you take her away a bit."

"For his sake, sister!" muttered Clark, trying to obey without exerting actual force. "Don't irritate him more than you can help. He will soon see for himself that he has little to gain from us."

"You have all my money," hoarsely muttered Aymer, again extending the pocketbook. "I am poor—miserably poor! Though the time was when I had enough. Time was—Take it, curse you!" with sudden energy hurling the wallet at the feet of the outlaw, then clasping his hands tightly behind his back, as though to resist temptation. "Take it and hide it! Only for her—only for her sake do I give it up! Were I alone, you should sooner tear my heart out!"

There was something in this outburst that was beyond all acting. Plainly Darius Aymer meant every word he uttered, and, strongly impressed with his manner, the outlaw stooped and caught up the pocketbook, opening it with hands that perceptibly trembled, but only to fling it down with a low oath as he realized its paltry contents—paltry in his eyes, though of such apparent value in those of its owner.

A few bank-bills, a gold coin or two, a little silver change; in all, less than fifty dollars, where the robber looked for thousands!

He said not a word as he picked up the wallet contributed by young Clark. In silence he opened it, to find hardly as much wealth as had rewarded his search in the other instance. And in silence he tossed both books with their contents over his shoulder to be caught by his masked followers.

His tones were hard and pitiless as he spoke again:

"For the last time, Darius Aymer, I remind you that this is sober business. I want your money. I have stopped this stage expressly to get that money, and have it I will, even if I have to take your miserable life with it! Once more—fork over!"

"You have it—every dollar. And my bitterest curse with it!"

"That don't count. I want the money stolen from the Merchants' Bank of —"

"Tell me where it is! Tell me where I can find it! Show me the wicked—" gasped the old man, springing forward and clutching the outlaw by the shoulders, his haggard face close to the sable mask, his sunken gray eyes glowing with an almost insane light.

The road-raider shrunk back, his armed hand raised as though to drive his assailant back by death. With a shriek Adine Aymer broke from her brother's grasp and darted forward, clinging to the armed hand, brokenly appealing for mercy.

"Spare him—spare my poor husband! He does not mean it—he is almost mad! He is not accountable for what he says!"

The outlaw flung the old man back, twisting free from the woman.

"See!" tearing off her rings with trembling haste. "Take all—take everything—only spare him! He is all I have left to love! He did not mean to anger you—he will be quiet—for my sake!"

"Have you got the money, then?" was the sharp demand.

"Money?" echoed Adine, pressing both hands to her head, a bewildered light filling her eyes. "I have no money. Why should I? He lets me want for nothing—my good, kind, noble husband!"

With a fierce oath the bandit turned and signed to his men. They leaped forward and grasped the two men, holding them helpless.

The chief moved closer to Darius Aymer, paying no further attention to the woman, who seemed stunned for the time being.

"Two of you search the hearse for the money. It is either there or hidden on them. Go through their clothes, lads."

Experienced hands make quick work, and two minutes later the deed was completed. The money for which, right or wrong, the brigand had taken so much trouble, was not to be found.

"Look here, you white-headed idiot!" the chief uttered, coldly and deliberately, yet with a purpose that could not be mistaken; "I know you left the last station with that money. I know it is somewhere within reach of my hand. I know you know where it is. I ask you once more to fork over, or, by the heavens above! I'll snuff out your light in a holy second!"

"I have no money," declared Aymer, shrinking a little from that evil gaze, but repeating: "I have no money. It is all gone. Even the few dollars through which I hoped to find him—to bring the black truth to light—to confound the wicked and right the innocent—even that little you have robbed me of! May my curses—"

"Have you got it?" turning abruptly toward Adine Aymer, gazing at her keenly as though

he would read the truth off-hand. "If so, give it up and spare yourself the shame of being searched. Find the money I will, and if you force me to treat you rudely, the blame be yours!"

"You coward!" grated Clark, his muscles growing rigid.

"Gag him if he opens his head again!" sternly ordered the chief to his subordinates. "And you," turning once more to old Aymer, "if you would spare the feelings of your dainty wife, bid her shell out the ducats. Come! I'm growing impatient!"

"It is gone—stolen!" muttered the old man, almost vacantly.

A gloved hand caught him by the throat. A revolver was thrust forward until the cold steel dented the skin of his temple. A hard, merciless voice uttered sharply:

"For the last time, shell out! Refuse, and out goes your light!"

"Easy, my sweet rascal!" cried a clear, mellow voice. "When it comes to snuffing, I reckon here's a pair of snufflers such as you read about! And both of them ready to shut down on your glorious wick!"

A smothered curse broke from the outlaw's lips as he turned his head, to see two horsemen covering him with Winchester rifles!

CHAPTER II.

A FAIR PROTECTRESS.

FLEEING for life!

Fleeing from a sure and frightful death!

Fleeing with limbs that tremble and shiver beneath his weight. With hot, painful gasps that seem to scorch the dry throat as the breath comes and goes—with a frightful throbbing through the temples, and a mist before his starting eyeballs—with a growing weakness against which not even the chilling horror of death—death by the shameful rope—death by hanging, like a miserable, sheep-killing cur—can long prevail.

Each moment is more bitter than any ordinary death. Though his sins were tenfold as many, tenfold as black, yet his punishment has exceeded his deserts.

Something of this flashes across the half-crazed brain of that miserable fugitive as his unsteady, blinded footsteps bring him in sharp contact with a rock, the heavy revolver to which he had clung through all these frightful miles falling from his hand to the ground.

"Let 'em do it! Let 'em come!" he gasped, instinctively clinging to a point of the rock, his head drooping forward until his forehead struck sharply against the rough boulder.

Only a slight blow, but sufficient to break the skin and let loose a little of the hot blood that filled his veins almost to bursting.

It may have been the smart—it may have been the sight of his own blood as it dropped on the rock before him, or it may have been the shouts that came floating along the broken trail; it may have been either, or all combined, but with renewed sight, the fugitive recovered his weapon and resumed his flight.

"Ef it was only dark! Ef I could only run across some o' the boys! Ef I hed my guns, full loaded!"

Pantingly, hardly distinguishable, came these and similar sentences, as on he plunged stumbling over the stones, tripping on roots or tangling his feet up in an occasional bunch of grass or weeds—on without a thought of whither his blind flight was carrying him, only feeling that death was crowding him close.

The mist was turning black before his bulging eyeballs, and soon his limbs refused to carry him further. With a groan, he sought to turn and face his foes, but pitched heavily forward upon his face.

"Thank God!"

The words burst from his parched lips in almost a shriek of joy, for he had fallen into a tiny rivulet of cold water that crossed the valley.

Water! That meant life, strength, renewed power of flight!

His bloody face was half-buried in the grateful element as he gulped down great mouthfuls. His hands dabbled in the water like those of a little child at play. For the moment he forgot all else in quenching his frightful thirst.

Only for the first few moments, however.

He caught the sounds of his pursuers, shouting aloud, evidently in savage glee, though they were far too distant for their words to be recognizable. They had seen him stagger and fall. No doubt they felt that, after so long a chase, their reward was almost earned.

"Not yit, you cussed devils!" panted the fugitive, lifting his head and glaring back over his shoulder, his trembling right hand mechanically dropping to his waist. "I ain't dead yit, as mebbe you'll discover! Only three c'atridges—my last three c'atridges—but I'll send 'em home fer keeps! Better go a little slow, you blood-hounds!"

One hand was brushing the drops of water from his face, pushing back the sweat-matted hair that fell in red locks over his eyes. Those eyes were glaring with reviving courage and hatred in search of his pursuers.

Only too soon he detected them, hastening up the valley, like himself on foot, like himself exhausted. For miles that chase had lasted, on horseback. Then, with some of their mounts dead of exhaustion, with others slain or crippled by the bullets sent back by the fugitive, the remnant were abandoned when the course of flight grew too rugged for hooved feet. For miles the chase had lasted on foot, until the weaker members had fallen out, until only five men kept up the chase of that one miserable wretch. And they were in but little better case, so killing had been their exertions.

A short, rasping laugh broke from the hunted man's lips as he saw how unsteady were the movements of his pursuers.

"Chokin' like I was! Dyin' fer a drop o' water! Come an' git it, ye bloodhounds—but you've got to fight fer it fu'st!"

His bloodshot eyes glanced hastily around, taking in each little point of vantage. His glance rested on two boulders, side by side, separated by a few inches, and over which grew a scanty covering of climbers.

"I kin stand 'em off fer a bit, anyway, an' thar's the place!" he panted, staggering forward to the twin rocks.

A shout came from down the valley. His enemies had caught sight of his figure, and were increasing their speed.

Leaning against one of the boulders, he shook his revolver menacingly in their direction, steadying his voice as well as he could.

"I'll call the turn on you, Mark Toogood, ef you try to crowd me any harder! Keep off, you dogs! I ain't dead yit!"

The enemy paused at this defiance, but it was more to gain a little breath than through fear, as the fugitive knew only too well.

"They'll down me, cuss 'em!" he grated, that hunted look returning to his bloodshot eyes once more. "Only three c'atridges—an' they's five o' them! Four, big, tough, nasty men to han'le. An' they'll pile on all to oncet. They'll down me, fer keeps—but I'll take some of 'em with me."

A savage glow filling his eyes, he leveled his pistol down the valley, as though eager to begin the work of death, but one hand was passed quickly across his eyes. His lids winked rapidly several times. He grasped the pistol-butt tighter, holding his breath until his face turned purple. He brought his left arm around before him, bent even with his throat forming a rest for the tube. And then a wail parted his lips.

"I cain't see straight! It's all a crooked dance afore my eyes! An' my han' trimbles so hard that I couldn't keep a mount'in kivered long enough to pull trigger."

Despairingly the broken sentences came, and that wild light deepened in his eyes, and once more his eyes turned as though to line out the easiest course for renewed flight.

"The game's open, an' the limit chucked under the table, Red Bergum!" now called out one of the pursuers, leaning against a rock in full view. "Say when you're ready fer business, an' I'm goin' fer you, make or break!"

The fugitive saw that all of his pursuers had halted, and thought of flight was abandoned, for the moment.

"I'll make sure o' him, anyway!" he grated beneath his breath, with a venomous glance toward the bold speaker below. "Only fer him, I wouldn't be here in sech a nasty hobble! Only fer him—I'll git even with you, Mark Toogood! An' then it don't matter so much!"

He cared little, now, how soon death came to him, if only he might first send that one bitter foe down to Hades.

"You won't git drunk at the wake, anyhow, Mark Toogood!" he shouted back, hoarsely. "I've chawed a bullet fer you, an' my hate'd make it go straight, even without aimin'!"

"You've dropped better men than I ever was, this day, Red Bergum; but I'll have a hand in your hangin', never you fret!"

"It'll be dead men's work all round, then!" defiantly. "I'll lay you out fu'st, an' then as many others as I've got time. But I'll keep one bullet for myself. I'll never hang livin'!"

"You know you lie when you say it, you cur!" contemptuously cried the burly miner, straightening up. "You're too big a coward to shoot yourself, an' too dirty-mean fer us to waste a bullet on. The rope'll fit you best—an' here it is!"

He loosened one end of a lasso that was coiled about his middle, shaking it clear of his person so the hunted man could not fail to recognize the ready-made noose. Then—

"Look out, Red Bergum! We're comin' fer ye now!"

Without drawing a weapon, or even attempting to avail himself of such cover as offered, Mark Toogood rushed forward, accompanied by his fellows.

The hunted man leaped behind his covert, and resting his revolver on one of the boulders, he pulled trigger, only to utter a savage anathema as he saw Mark Toogood come on without flinching or faltering.

Again and again the weapon spoke, the bullets flying wild of the mark aimed at, though one struck down a man close beside Toogood.

The wild scream of pain caused the avengers

to halt, and as they gathered around the fallen man Red Bergum hurled aside the faithless weapon, and with all the mad horror returning, he broke in flight.

"He's off! Fetch him back fer me to pull on the rope!" gasped the wounded man, almost rudely repulsing his comrades.

A brief hesitation. Then the sight of the fleeing murderer drove all other thoughts from their minds. And with Mark Toogood at their head, the comrades dashed on in pursuit.

A brief pause at the little brook, just long enough to swallow a few mouthfuls of water. Then on with renewed speed and determination.

For full another hour that terrible race lasted, such is the power given one by the fear of death!

There came no shouts from the rear now, yet Red Bergum knew that the avengers were still on his track. He did not look back. He could not have distinguished face or figure if he had through that frightful red mist. But he knew they were drawing nearer, slowly but surely—with a horrible certainty!

And then—as by magic his vision was cleared and he saw a rude stone house before him; saw an open door, in which stood a fair young girl, gazing at him with wide eyes; and seeing so much, a wild hope leaped into his despairing soul.

"Save me!" he gasped, reeling forward, his hands outstretched. "For the love o' kind heaven! save me from those—those devils!"

Startled, frightened by his horrible aspect—for the red blood was once more trickling over his face, started anew by his frantic flight—the maiden shrunk back a little. And then, with a last effort, the hunted man reeled across the threshold, to fall in a helpless mass at her feet.

Only an instant did she hesitate. Then, as she saw how helpless was the poor wretch who had asked her for protection in the name of holy heaven—as she heard hoarse, angry shouts coming from without—she snatched a Winchester repeater from the hooks over the fireplace and sprung across the threshold, closing the door behind her.

"Back!" she cried sharply, the rifle raising to her shoulder with an ease and grace that betokened long familiarity with that unfeminine weapon. "Back, or I'll open fire—and shoot to kill!"

Mark Toogood was in advance of his comrades, and promptly halted, mechanically throwing up his unarmed hands as he replied:

"You wouldn't murder your friends, would ye, Miss Puss?"

"You—Mark Toogood!" ejaculated the maiden, in amazement.

"What they is left o' me, Little Puss," with a faint smile as he dropped down on a rock, panting so violently that she could see his broad chest rise and fall, even at that distance. "You needn't mind the boys, honey-sweet," as his comrades came up and dropped down near him. "They're pure gold, though they ain't much fer manners—like me! I reckon they're 'bout as nigh played out as men ever git to be—an' all 'long o' that p'izen sarpint as you've got under your gun, Puss!"

"Who is he? What has he done?"

"Nothin' wu'th complainin' of," with a short, hard laugh. "Stole some hosses. Killed two good boys, an' crippled three more. Of course we was all wrong, an' him all right. We hedn't no business to try fer to git our property back. An' when he left it—one dead, the others crippled through pure deviltry—we hed a right to turn back an' thank him fer bein' so mighty kind. What ef he hed shot down Jim Magill? Sech a little thing didn't ought to count ag'in' sech as him!"

A sorely-troubled light came into the fair face—for Puss Curtis was fair—as she listened. Then she caught a faint, gasping moan from beyond the closed door. She saw, in imagination, that helpless wretch lying there in his blood—heard him appeal to her for aid, in the name of Heaven.

"You are sure there is no mistake? This poor wretch is the man who—who did all that?" she asked, her tones wavering, her face turning very pale.

"Shell I kiss the Bible on it, Little Puss?"

"And if I give him up to you, what will you do with him?"

"Treat him as too good by a heap fer this airth," was the prompt and significant response.

"You would kill him?"

"Why not?" with abrupt fierceness. "Didn't he kill Jim Magill? Didn't he shoot down Tom Magatagan? Isn't his trail kivered over with the blood o' honest men—one drop o' which is wu'th ten thousan' times more than all that ever run in his veins? Kill him! Ef I could, I'd keep him dyin' from now till Christmas!"

His enforced composure gave way as he recalled the crimes of the hunted man, and with a hard, vengeful light glowing in his big blue eyes Mark Toogood sprung to his feet, only to pause at his second step forward. For the rifle covered his heart, and over the barrel came:

"Stop right there, Mark Toogood! Don't force me to do you harm."

"You, Little Puss!" in dull surprise. "Did-

n't you hear me tell all what that dog's done? You ain't standin' up fer the likes o' him?"

"We'll take him away, miss," ventured one of the others. "We won't stretch his neck whar you kin see."

"Stand back, I warn you!" with flashing eyes and steady tones. "He appealed to me in the name of Heaven, and I'll not give him over to death such as you threaten, vile criminal though he may be."

CHAPTER III.

THE MAN OF SILK.

"WISH I may never chaw another bite ef it ain't The Man o' Silk!"

Shrill and distinct rung out the voice of Hungry Derrick, and with a catlike leap that carried him safe under cover of a big rock lying alongside the trail, yet leaving him in full view of the startled road-raiders, he hastily added, his unarmed hands up and open:

"Never mind me, gents! I'm stripped dry, an' you've got my guns, which you'll need 'em all an' more, too, ef you're goin' to meet that purrin' critter's bluff—yes you will, now!"

It was breath wasted. Just then the brigands had neither thoughts nor looks for the driver.

There was an almost general shrinking back as Hungry Derrick uttered that peculiar title, but it might have been from those leveled weapons alone, for terribly business-like they looked, and if the nerves of the men who held the weapons were anything like as steady as the clear voice which sent forth that half-mocking warning, the long odds which now existed might melt away before a single shot could be fired in return.

Like the rest, the chief glanced quickly in the direction of that voice, but his grip on the throat of the white-haired passenger only tightened, and the muzzle of his revolver pressed harder against his temple.

"Hold off, you!" he cried, viciously, with a short shake of his head in the direction of the two horsemen. "Come a foot nearer, or burn one grain of powder, and out goes his light forever!"

"Oh, don't!" and the stranger fanned the air with his left hand, its mate holding the heavy Winchester at a steady level unaided. "For your own precious sake, do you the holding hard. I'll make a holy riddle of you in less than half a second if you don't drop that monkey-work and skin out for tall timber! You hear me?"

"Me, too! Business is business!" bluntly added his companion, the muzzle of his rifle sweeping back and forth as though endeavoring to cover them one and all at the same time.

"You curs!" snarled the masked chief. "Will you take a bluff from two men? Drop them both! You can do it with a snap-shot, if you all work together. Ready, now! When I say the word, let 'em have it!"

He completed the sentence, but that was all. With a shrill scream, Adine Aymer sprang forward and flung her whole weight against his arms, at the same time dashing her tiny fists full into his face.

It was like a little kitten attacking a great mastiff, but its very unexpectedness possibly rendered the effort more successful than even the plucky little woman could have anticipated.

The masked chief staggered back, almost losing his balance, his armed hand flying upward as the weapon exploded with the shock, but before he could strike a blow or take a step to recover his advantage, there came another report; the revolver dropped from his hand, and red blood spurted through the perforated glove as the bullet-shattered member dropped helplessly to his side.

"Withered drop the hand that is lifted in anger against fair woman!" cried The Man of Silk, mockingly, through the curl of blue smoke.

"Tally one for the Baby!" rumbled his huge companion, his deep tones mingling with the sharp report of his Winchester.

The masked outlaw who had been holding Bush Clark dropped to the ground without cry or moan.

That warning was enough; all the road-agents suddenly leaped into the leafy cover from whence they had ambushed the stage, only to reappear the next moment, mounted and riding for dear life, with the crippled chief at their head.

"Picnic! Come on! We'll run in the whole gang!" shouted the horseman, dashing forward, his repeater sending out a stream of smoke and bullets.

"Enough is as good as a feast, pard!" cried The Man of Silk, a touch of the spurs sending his good horse up even with the other, when one deft wrench with his small hand on the reins brought the big horseback on its haunches. "It's all right as long as the surprise is on our side; but six to two, and those six with the drop, don't pan out altogether too lovely, now, I tell you!"

"They won't quit running until—"

"They get ready. Well, let's set 'em a good example by quitting before we begin. You'll live all the longer for it, pard!" lightly interposed the other, dropping his companion's bridle-rein, now that his point was won.

The road-raiders were already out of sight and almost out of hearing.

"Whooray fer The Man o' Silk!" cried Hungry Derrick, springing from his covert, flinging his weather-beaten slouch hat to the ground and breaking out in a fresh spot, his bony limbs flung loosely about as he set up a fantastic dance. "With a rig-a-jig-jig, an' a rig-a-jig-jig! Who says he ain't jest little ole persimmons?"

With a low, mellow laugh, the hero thus celebrated, rode forward, springing lightly to the ground, a smile on his face as he extended his hand to the delighted driver.

"Hungry, yours truly. If I'd known you were in ambush, laying for the heathen, I'd have lain back until after you got a square meal. Why didn't you stick out your sign?"

"The sight o' your sweet face is more'n meat an' drink to me, even ef I was starvin'," grinned the driver, uniting his bony hands in giving the regulation pump-handle shake. "Good Land! the way. Curry me down, somebody, or I'll hev a fit an' step in it."

There is no saying to what extent his feelings would have carried him, only Bush Clark at that moment interposed, his face flushed, his dark eyes fairly glowing with pleasure as he uttered his thanks.

"Only for you, my poor sister would have suffered for her impulsive defense of her husband. Only for you those demons might have added murder to—eh?"

"Did I speak?" blandly smiled The Man of Silk, as Clark started back, the color fading from his dark face, a look of surprise that might almost be called fear, coming into his eyes. "Beg pardon, I'm sure. I didn't go to do it—whatever it was."

"Pilgrim, Mister Felix Bland, better known as The Man o' Silk—two yards wide, an' every thread made out o' double refined gold," bowed the driver, with a graceful wave of the hand. "One o' my insides, boss. White, I reckon, though bein' a woman was along, he couldn't show his color too brash when we was jumped by those imps. Gents, know each other. An' ef—"

A hoarse, inarticulate cry cut him short, drawing all eyes toward the husband and wife.

They saw Darius tear Adine's clinging arms from about his neck; saw him thrust the little woman almost rudely from him; saw him staring wildly toward them, his haggard face almost convulsed with some strong emotion. And then, with hurried, unsteady footsteps, they saw the old man advance, and heard him gasp:

"At last! My weary search is—at an—Ah!"

His trembling hands rose to his throat, tearing at his collar as though it was suddenly grown too tight. And then, before an arm could interpose, he reeled and fell to the ground.

"Poor fellow," muttered Bush Clark, springing forward. "The excitement has been too much for him, I fear."

Adine knelt where she had fallen when flung aside by her husband, but her eyes were fastened upon the face of Felix Bland with a gaze that was curiously intent; so intent that she seemed ignorant of the mishap that had befallen her husband.

And Hungry Derrick, his mouth open, stared blankly into the face of The Man of Silk—a face that was strangely white and hard-set, now. And the light that glowed in those brown eyes: was it terror, or simple surprise? Was it caused by the strange actions of Darius Aymer, or did it come through meeting this woman with the baby face?

"Get out, clumsy," rumbled the deep voice of the big man, as he unceremoniously pushed Bush Clark aside, kneeling by the side of the fallen man and loosening the collar about his swollen throat. "Rush o' blood to the head. Nothing to frighten. See!"

With a touch of scorn he noted the fading away of that unhealthy purple flush, glancing up into the dark face of the other.

Dark, and yet pale as though the grip of death was closing about his heart. And Bush Clark moved slowly back, his jetty eyes shifting uneasily, yet unable to keep away from that broad, rugged countenance.

"You don't look over well yourself," bluntly uttered the big man, as he drew a capacious flask from his pocket, unscrewing the top and filling the silver cup from the bottom with whisky, handing it toward Clark. "Take a swallow. Have seen better, but it'll bring the color back to that pasty face of yours—sure!"

He turned to Darius Aymer, bathing his temples with the strong liquor, cool and steady-nerved, seeming to forget the presence of all others in that humane duty.

And Bush Clark swallowed the whisky, dropping the cup beside its owner, turning away toward his sister, a deep breath that might have been one of intense relief escaping his lips.

"It's nothing serious, pard," called out the big man, glancing over his shoulder toward The Man of Silk. "Only a fainty-spell. Don't look any too rugged, though."

Felix Bland gave a little start, then strode forward, bending over the prostrate man, his face

cold and expressionless. Hungry Derrick saw this, and shook his head slowly as he glanced toward Adine Aymer.

"Durn the wimmen, anyhow! You cain't trust 'em two inches! To look at her, one'd take oath she was a baby, jest beginnin' to walk alone; but she's hit the boss mighty hard—an' it wasn't done *this* day, nuther!"

Right or wrong, it was none of his affair, and he turned away to prepare his crippled team for the road as best he might.

"Darius—husband, darling!" came a low, tremulous voice from close beside The Man of Silk. "Thank Heaven, you are alive!"

With a low bow, Felix Bland stepped aside, the movement attracting those babyish blue eyes for an instant. Had Hungry Derrick been near enough his hasty conclusion might have been unsettled, for, brief though the period during which the brown eyes and blue met, there was nothing of recognition in either pair.

"He is recovering, madam; it is only the natural reaction," he said quietly. "He does not look very rugged, and to one from a more civilized region these road-agents are terrifying fellows."

The sound of his voice seemed to have even greater powers than the whisky so freely used by the big man. With a start and a shiver Darius Aymer opened his eyes, staring wildly into that calm, grave face.

"At last!" gasped the old man, struggling to rise, a strange light chasing the dazed expression from his sunken eyes. "It is you! I am not dreaming, *now*!"

"Darius—dear husband!" murmured Adine, her arms winding about him, striving to lift his head to her bosom. "See—all is well! You are safe, and those dreadful—"

"Not you—I want *him*!" gasped Aymer, resisting her gentle efforts, his eyes still fixed upon the face of The Man of Silk. "Ah!" and a groan broke from his livid lips, as a sudden shivering attacked his gaunt frame. "He's fading away! Hold him fast! He must not escape me now! He must—must—"

The big man tightened his hold upon the sufferer, his big blue eyes roving swiftly from face to face, but lingering longest on that of the man whom he called partner. And as Darius Aymer sunk back, helpless and swooning once more, he uttered gravely:

"I reckon you'd better step aside a little, pard. The old gent seems to take you for one of those rascals, he's so shaken, just now. And you, too, madam, might—"

"He's my husband!"

"And his best friend, of course," with a short nod. "But, somehow, in these little spells, it's the faces of one's best friends that give the most trouble. Still, if you prefer—"

"For his sake, sister!" muttered Bush Clark, his sinewy hand closing on Adine's shoulder. "Only until he fully recovers his senses."

Without a word she obeyed, though the tears were rolling freely from her eyes.

Felix Bland, cold and unmoved, also withdrew, looking to the two horses which had until now been left without fastening, though they showed some little fright or uneasiness at the bloody body of the veteran wheeler.

Tying them beside the road, The Man of Silk bent over the corpse of the outlaw shot by his comrade, cutting the strings that held the sable mask in place. A rough, bearded, sin-marked countenance was laid bare, but, though Felix Bland gave it a long and close scrutiny, there was nothing in his eyes or face to show that he had ever seen it before. And then, dropping the mask over the pain-distorted face, he rose erect, to realize that his own face was being scrutinized quite as closely.

It was not a remarkable face, in any respect. It might even be termed commonplace, for it was a face such as one meets every day in the year, with strong features, perhaps, but with naught about it that would attract attention in a crowd, or awaken interest in even an ardent student of human nature—a face that matched well with his figure, since that was of medium size, fairly well put together, but, so far as simple inspection could determine, gifted with neither unusual power nor stamina.

A heavy brown mustache covered the upper lip and shaded the mouth. His hair was brown, close-cropped. His eyes, of medium size, were of the same color, and in no ways remarkable.

His garb was plain, of rough gray cloth. He wore heavy riding-boots, spurred at the heel in Mexican fashion. A leather belt encircled his waist, supporting a brace of heavy revolvers and a knife. Just above it was a second belt, of webbing, the loops filled full of fixed ammunition for pistols and rifle.

This was the man known far and wide as one of the coolest, nerviest, most reckless characters where one must be brave indeed to rise above the common herd. This was the man whose fame had spread throughout all the mining country as the bravest of the brave; whose unruffled *sang froid* in the face of the heaviest odds, under the most trying circumstances, had won for him the significant title of "The Man of Silk."

It was Adine Aymer who was so closely regarding him, and as he became aware of this

fact Felix Bland saw her break away from Bush Clark and come forward, her face blushing and paling alternately, her eyes filled with mingled curiosity and anger—if one so tender, so babyish might be said to feel anger.

"Is there anything I can do for you, madam?" he asked, removing his hat with a bow, his tones soft and gentle.

"Who are you? What is your name? Why is he—my poor, dear husband—so frightened of you?" breathlessly demanded Adine, yet shrinking a little, a half-frightened look in her blue eyes.

"My name is Felix Bland. I am a rolling-stone. Was he frightened of me? Of course, since *you* say so," with another bow, and still blander smile. "Then—probably he mistook me for one of the road-agents."

"Not that—you *know* that is not it!" almost passionately. "It is more than that. He recognized your face, as that of one—surely you are not an enemy?" with a sudden change of voice and manner, impulsively stepping forward and clasping his arm with her trembling hands. "You will not harm him? He is so weak, so feeble. And—he is all I have on earth to love, now—him and my brother!"

"They are to be congratulated—I beg your pardon," with a little shrug of the shoulders, as Adine shrunk back from his steady gaze. "I should not have said that, sincerely as I may feel it. As for hurting your husband, even were he my bitterest enemy—and I can number them by legions—the fact that he has *you* for an advocate would render him sacred in my sight."

Was there a trace of mockery in his tones? Adine seemed to think so, for she shrunk back, her red lips quivering, tears coming to dim the luster of her eyes. The Man of Silk saw this, and in quick, earnest tones he added:

"Believe me, madam, I am in earnest. Your husband has nothing to fear from me. I do not believe we ever met before this hour. If so, I have forgotten it."

"Yet his words—his looks—"

"Were nothing more than fright at those rough customers, I reckon. As you say, he is not well, and—"

The Man of Silk paused short, as he saw Darius Aymer on his feet and approaching the spot where they stood. Adine turned at his glance, and with a little cry, almost a sob, she rushed forward and flung her arms about the gaunt figure.

"Thank Heaven! you are well again, dear? You are—"

Darius Aymer did not even look at her as his bony hands caught and removed hers, pushing her to one side. His sunken eyes were fixed upon the calm, plain face of the adventurer.

"Not now—I must see *him*!" he muttered, hoarsely. "Go away—go to your brother—I must not be hindered now! It is my last chance—my last feeble hope!"

"Humor him, madam," softly muttered The Man of Silk. "You have my pledge, and may rest content."

With a sobbing cry, Adine reached up and drew that haggard face down until her red lips could touch it. With an impatient gesture the old man thrust her aside so rudely that she staggered and almost fell. Then he grasped The Man of Silk by the arm, his voice harsh but trembling as he uttered:

"I must see you—alone! I must talk with you, for—"

His voice choked and grew unintelligible. Felix Bland quietly drew one arm through his in such a manner as to partly support the old man, saying gravely:

"You shall have your wish, my dear sir. I will do for you all I can, though, to speak plainly, I reckon you've picked up the wrong man. I do not know you, if we ever met before."

"Still resentful? You have not forgotten, then?"

"I reckon I must," with a slight smile.

Darius Aymer groaned faintly and leaned more heavily upon the arm of the adventurer as they left the spot, passing up the trail for a little distance. Then, as the stage was hidden from view and The Man of Silk came to a pause, his companion suddenly gathered strength, facing him with desperate energy, his face contorted painfully.

"Give me back my good name, you miserable wretch! Restore me my blackened honor! Undo your devilish work, or—"

He choked, and would have fallen only for the ready arm of Bland.

"You are trying your feeble powers too severely, my dear sir," he said gently, as he led the old man from the trail to a moss-covered rock. "Sit down for a few moments and try to compose yourself."

"So you can dodge me again!" panted Aymer, with faint fierceness.

"Shall I swear to remain? Have you a pair of bracelets handy?" the other laughed, coldly.

"Will you take this?" handing him a revolver butt first.

"Cold and heartless! Cold and heartless!" moaned the old man, covering his face with his hands, his gaunt frame shaking convulsively.

Gravely The Man of Silk stood by waiting un-

til Darius Aymer chose to speak again. The minutes passed by without any such attempt, and a frown of impatience was settling over Felix Bland's face at the long delay, when the old man suddenly sprung to his feet, crying hoarsely:

"Justice! Give me back my good name, or I'll forget that the same blood flows in our veins and drag you to your doom without mercy! Free my name from this foul stain, or I'll take the law into my own hands!"

With a low cry The Man of Silk stepped back, throwing up his right hand, now grasping a revolver, firing the instant it rose to a level.

There came a wild cry, and then a human form rolled down the rocks into the rough trail before them!

CHAPTER IV.

A LOVER IN THE BREACH.

No signs of womanly weakness or of yielding in that voice or attitude. Clear and distinct the one; firm and resolute the other.

"But, Pretty Puss," ejaculated Mark Toogood, recoiling just a trifle, though a more reckless man never drew breath, so far as his own welfare was concerned. "You don't understand. You don't 'pear to take in what I told ye 'bout that dirty whelp. It ain't your daddy's gal that'd fly up in the face o' common jestice like this, fer a low-down—"

"Not in the face of justice, Mark Toogood, but against *murder*!"

"Ag'inst murder—yit you pull a gun to protect that critter? An' his hands dripping red with honest blood!"

"If he has sinned against the law, let the law punish him as he deserves, Mark Toogood!"

"Eye fer eye, an' tooth fer tooth. It ain't like *you* to go back onto the Good Book, Little Puss. It ain't no sech lessons Posey Curtis ever l'arned his daughter, I know. Ef Posey was here—"

"If father was here his will should rule, be my opinion what it might," was the calm response. "But, he is not here. I do not know for certain when he will be here. But this I do know, Mark Toogood: This wretched man appealed to me in the name of Heaven, begging me to save his life. He fell across my threshold, and I can hear him moaning and gasping as he lies helpless, on the floor. Though his crimes were ten times as black as you have painted them, I would not give him up to such a cruel death as you mean to measure out."

One in a thousand was Little Puss Curtis just then, her fine, if diminutive figure resting lightly on her advanced left foot, her half-bare arms holding the repeater ready for a raise, a bright flush coming into her face and a steady glow in her dark eyes.

The rude stone cabin, half-hidden beneath climbing vines that crossed even the roof; a background of rocks and bushes and straggling trees, sloping upward toward the distant mountains, beginning almost from the rear of the cabin.

Before the door of hewn slabs which still bore the marks of the pioneer's ax, a girl, whose demeanor was none the less heroic because it was natural and unstudied, a girl whose seemed scarcely in her teens, until her face was studied, until her perfectly-developed figure was noted, partly disguised as it was by her coarse dress of calico. But, none who saw her now, standing between the avengers of blood and their helpless prey, could for a moment have doubted that Puss Curtis was a woman in soul and courage.

Short and slight in build, not larger than many a girl of twelve, Puss Curtis was nearly twenty years of age: a perfect brunette, with jetty hair that lay in curls about her small head, its very shortness adding to her youthful appearance; with great eyes, black and lustrous as those of a startled fawn; with a skin as soft and pure as that of an infant, on which the action of wind and sun could do no more than paint a few tiny freckles; with red roses in her cheeks, and redder, warmer coloring on her lips; with dimpled chin, graceful neck, and a form that had never known nor felt the need of artificial bracing or supports, even as its owner had never known a languid hour or an hour of sickness since she could remember.

Her dress of print reached not quite to the ankle. Over it a "bib-apron" of different color. Beaded moccasins were on her feet, the work of her own little hands, as were the gray woolen hose that rose above them. A narrow white collar rimmed the throat, and a scarlet ribbon was crossed above her forehead; these latter her only ornaments.

Mark Toogood frowned at her words, even while he could not help smiling at the piquant picture thus presented.

Bold, unmaidenly, some might have pronounced the girl who paused, armed in defense of the helpless; not so the four hardy men who stood at the base of the gentle slope before the stone cabin. To them a more glorious sight could not have been presented, even though it formed a bar to their vengeance.

"Now Puss, Pretty Puss!" coaxingly repeated the burly miner, fanning his heated brow with

his broad-brimmed hat. "You don't look at it like you ought—so you don't! Think what the critter's done! Stole good hosses, an' then—"

"I know what he is, Mark Toogood, and—"

"The blackest, meanest hellion this side o' Tophet!" broke in one of the others, with a sudden burst of anger.

"I know that he is weak and suffering—that he has been hunted to the verge of the grave, and suffered a thousand deaths!"

"Ef he hes, Pretty Puss, it ain't nothin' to the punishment he hes airned," gravely declared Toogood.

"I know that he trusted in me, begging me to protect him. And knowing this, gentlemen, I ask to know no more. You may drag him out of this house, if you will—"

"We don't ax no more, Little Puss!" eagerly interposed Toogood, starting forward, only to pause abruptly, flinging back his head as a sharp report rung out and a bullet whistled close to his ear.

"Back, Mark Toogood!" cried Puss Curtis, her practiced hand deftly working the lever that flung out the empty shell and refixed a fresh cartridge, never lowering the weapon or losing her steady aim.

"You wouldn't kill a fri'nd, Puss?"

The voice that uttered these words was far from steady, though it was not from personal fear. Mark Toogood feared death as little as any mortal could. It was the thought of having his blood on *her* hands that unmanned him for the instant.

"I sent that as a warning, Mark," and there was the faint echo of a laugh in the maiden's voice that brought a hot flush to the bronzed face of the burly miner. "You know I'm good for a much smaller mark at double the distance. Only a warning—nay! a *prayer*, rather!"

The miner laughed grimly, as he retorted:

"Durned ef I didn't think it sounded some-thin' like a call to 'penitence!"

"If you would only listen to it, Mark!" cried Puss, her face paling and her tones growing less steady. "If you would only listen and obey! I don't want to hurt you—I would rather suffer death myself than to fire at you and those with you with an aim that means death!"

"Nur we ain't over anxious fer you to shoot any closer, Puss. We ain't so much a'count, I'm free to own up; but I reckon we're wuth a heap more then that dirty cur Red Bergum. Ef he was anythin' of a white man—ef he wasn't sech a low-down dirty dog, too mean to be kicked to death by grasshoppers—it wouldn't go so rough, gittin' shot in tryin' to bring him to the punishment he deserves. But, to be shot fer him—an' by you! That gits us, Little Puss! That gits us clean down to bedrock an' back ag'in!"

"It would be easier for you to die than for me to kill, friends," brokenly uttered the girl, yet showing no other signs of flinching. "I beg of you to go away and not force me to such a horrible extremity! Go! Leave this miserable wretch to heaven's justice! If he has sinned, so he shall suffer, in God's own time!"

Mark Toogood grew graver, sterner. His mates were frowning and beginning to interchange ugly glances as they nervously handled their weapons.

"I reckon we're His ap'in'ted tools to kerry out that jestic, Little Puss," soberly uttered the miner. "Ef not—ef we've made any mistake in that line—it's too late to begin another drift, now. Thar's our mates—good lads an' true! Thar's them that is dead through his work. Jim Magill an' Tom Magatagan. Thar wasn't no little woman to stan' atween them an' his gun—wuss luck! Thar's Dick Damson, an' Mose Weatherby, an' Zip Coon, layin' crippled an' helpless, only waitin' fer him to come back that they kin see him sent over the divide afore them. An' yit you stan' back!"

"I say it again, Mark Toogood," with a vanishment of that brief tremulousness, her voice ringing out sternly. "He appealed to me, and in my eyes he is human. You may murder him, but not while I can fire a shot or strike a blow in his defense. You may drag him forth to hang him, but not unless you do it over my dead body!"

Not loud and boasting. The simple truth, expressed in the plainest of words. But all the more impressive on that account, because those who looked and listened could see how thoroughly each word was meant.

Mark Toogood turned to his mates, his brows contracting, the uneasy light deepening in his honest eyes.

"It's got to be done, pard," one of the trio muttered, hastily. "We can't let him slip through our grip, after all this!"

"She ain't nothin' but a gal, anyhow!" growled another.

Upon him Mark Toogood turned with an ominous growl and flashing gaze, his voice hard and menacing as he uttered:

"She's as nigh a angel as a woman ever gits, Dan Orvis, an' you write this down in your noggin: ef you hurt one ha'r o' her head, I'll kill you, sure as the sun is shinin' over yender!"

"We can't git him 'thout puttin' her out o' the door kin we?"

"Mebbe yes, mebbe no. Anyway, she ain't

to be hurt, even though she shoots every durned one o' us, *mind that!*"

"It's Red Bergum I'm thinkin' most of," was the sulky reply. "Show how we kin git him without handlin' her rough, an' I'm satisfied. But I don't back out now, an' poor Tom layin' back thar, dead by his dirty hand! Gal or no gal—threats or no threats—*he's my meat!*"

"I want him just as bad as you do, but that ain't bad enough to do harm to Little Puss," gravely responded Toogood.

"Smart as the gal is, she cain't look more'n one way at once," suddenly put in the fourth member of the party, who had kept silence until now, though his keen eyes had not been idle.

"What's the matter with makin' a sorter surround? She cain't shoot through a stone wall."

"They's only the front door. The winders is too small fer a man to crawl through," retorted Mark.

"What's the matter with slippin' round the corner an' jumpin' the gal, then?"

During this pause Little Puss was watching the men below her position, trying to divine their intentions. And as the last speaker involuntarily made a gesture to the more clearly indicate his scheme, she instinctively divined their purpose, and called out sharply:

"Don't try it, I beg of you, gentlemen! Once more, I don't want to hurt you, but if I see any signs of trickery—if any one of you try to creep away to take me by surprise—I'll drop him, as sure as the sun shines up yonder!"

"You see?" growled Dan Orvis, with an ugly frown. "They's only the one way. We've got to run in on her, an' resk her lead!"

"She means it, every word," muttered Mark, gloomily. "She'll shoot to kill, an' I never see a prittier nur a more sart'in shot!"

"I ain't quite so big a target as you be, but I'll even it up by goin' ahead o' the rest," with a thinly-disguised sneer that brought the hot blood leaping into the face of the burly miner.

His answer might not have been so agreeable, only for a sharp cry which broke from the lips of their silent comrade. He pointed toward the stone cabin, his face flushing, his eyes aglow, his voice excited:

"Thar's some one ahead o' us!"

Before they could ask his meaning, it was made clear to all.

The figure of a man sprung around the corner of the cabin and stood beside Little Puss. One arm passed partly around her waist, but it was not with the touch of an enemy, and the little cry of terror which broke from her paling lips was quickly turned to a sob of joy.

"Booth—thank kind Heaven you have come!" she sobbed, her resolution failing her for an instant, the rifle almost dropping from her trembling hands.

"Hold hard, you fellows!" sharply cried the new-comer, his left hand coming away to reinforce his right, a brace of heavy revolvers covering the party of avengers as they impulsively started forward to take advantage of this seeming opportunity.

"Back, I warn you for the last time!" cried Little Puss, recovering her composure and renewing her steady aim at the same moment.

"I am not alone, now!"

Dan Orvis, his thin face passion-flushed, crouched for a desperate rush, but the strong hand of Mark Toogood caught and jerked him back.

"Stiddy, pard!" he muttered, warningly. "It's a man we've got to deal with now. Mebbe we kin make him listen to reason. Ef not—"

"I'll try it on alone, ef you're all too skeered to back me up!"

"What is it, Puss?" hurriedly asked Booth Barrett, scarce daring to remove his eyes for an instant from the men below. "Who are they, and what does it all mean? Surely they don't mean to harm you?"

"In yonder—a poor wretch they chased here to hang! He begged me to save his life—and I couldn't refuse—could I?" murmured Little Puss, with a quivering lip and an appealing, half-frightened look.

Booth Barrett frowned darkly, his bearded lips compressing tightly as though to keep back a reproach—certainly it was not the unhesitating approval a lover should give his sweetheart. But he was a man, with a man's reason.

"What do they charge him with? What—"

"I say, *you!*" called out Mark Toogood, at that juncture.

"What is it?" bluntly demanded the new-comer.

"Business, chuck-up! Thar's a dirty dog in the cabin yender, that's our meat. We're comin' up after him, an' ef you don't want to git hurt in the scramble, I reckon you'd better pull out while thar's room."

"I've seen you before some place, if I'm not mistaken. Your name is Goodman, or—"

"Toogood."

"Thanks. You look too good to be bullying a lady after this mad fashion, but appearances lie, it seems."

"Never you mind my name," doggedly retorted the miner. "As fer the lady, Little Puss knows me, ef you don't."

"I know you for an honest man, a true friend, and one whom I never expected to be obliged to threaten in dead earnest before this day!" impulsively cried Puss, a faint trembling in her tones.

"Nur you wouldn't this day, ef that dirty whelp of a Red Bergum hedn't broke into your house, Pritty Puss—or ef you hedn't drawed a gun to keep him from what he deserves a thousand times over!"

"Mebbe the gent will listen to reason better," suggested one of the party, soothingly. "Mebbe he'll take the gal out o' the way, leavin' us to take Red Bergum back to satisfy his score?"

There was a slight pause, broken by Booth Barrett:

"The decision rests with Miss Curtis. If she is willing to surrender this man to you, for such punishment as you may see fit to inflict, I have nothing to say against it. You are willing, Puss?" he asked, in a lowered tone, glancing swiftly toward the maiden.

"No—I cannot! I dare not!" she cried, impulsively. "It would seem like murder to me! The poor wretch is so helpless! And he begged me to save him—in kind heaven's name!"

Booth Barrett turned toward the expectant miners, his face grave and resolute, his voice steady as fate as he spoke:

"You have your answer, gentlemen. Miss Curtis declines to surrender this poor devil to your tender mercies."

Again Dan Orvis clutched a weapon and crouched like a wild beast on the point of making its leap. Again the strong hand of Mark Toogood restrained him.

Grave, cold, almost dignified, he called out:

"We hed *her* answer, fu'st off. Pritty Puss ain't one to change with the wind, like a weather-cock. It ain't *her* answer we look fer, but *yours!*"

"Her answer is mine," was the quick response.

"Wait a bit before swearing to that," interposed Mark, who was really anxious to gain his purpose without further strife or bloodshed. "Let me tell you jest what the matter is. Let me give you a idee o' the dirty dog you're helpin' to cheat justice. Let me tell you how many good boys—"

"If you insist, of course I can't stop your talk," interjected Booth Barrett. "But I warn you beforehand that it is all breath spent in vain. I don't ask the facts. I simply know that you are making a demand which this lady sees fit to resist. That is enough for me. I side with her, right or wrong."

"Durn the chinnin'!" growled Orvis. "Down with the critter. It's got to come to that, anyway. Why not *now?*"

"Thank you, old fellow," laughed Booth Barrett, with a half-mocking bow toward the vengeful speaker. "I know who I'll drop first, now."

"They's bin two good an' true men killed sence Red Bergum tuck to his heels this time, stranger," gravely added Mark Toogood. "They is three more honest lads crippled fer life—ef they're still livin'. Think it over well afore you add to the score."

"On your head be it, not on mine," promptly retorted the lover. "All I know, or care to know, is this: I find you besieging this building. I find the owner bidding you keep off, under penalty. And finding matters thus, I take sides with the lady. And taking sides, be sure I'll do my level best to make hers come out ahead, killing or no killing."

"Wait until father comes back, Mark Toogood—wait until then, and I'll agree to let him decide the case," cried Little Puss, her tone far less resolute than when she was unsupported.

Then, she had only herself to think of. Now, the man she was fast learning to love above all things earthly, was in peril through the stand she had taken. And she listened tremblingly, hopefully, for the answer to her proposal.

How her heart sunk as she saw the miner slowly shake his head.

"Ef it wasn't fer the boys we left crippled, mebbe dyin', on the trail ahind us, Puss, I'd jump at the chance, fer right well I know Posey Curtis wouldn't never harbor a dog like Red Bergum when he knowed what bloody deeds the critter hes done. But fer *thar* sakes, I cain't wait no longer then it'll take to drag the whelp out o' thar."

"After you've gained an entrance, you mean," suggested Barrett.

"In five minnits we'll make a try fer it, stranger," was the grim response. "Ef you don't give way—waal, mebbe you'll git hurt."

CHAPTER V.

A FATHER IN SEARCH OF A SON.

DARIUS AYMER started back with a gasp of horror as The Man of Silk whipped forth his revolver, but his fears were needless. The shot that came so swiftly was not intended for the old man.

Up among the rocks a few yards above the level of the stage-trail a man was crouching listening to their words, peering eagerly down

through the scrubby bushes and weeds. And as the pistol exploded, a wild yell escaped his lips; he started to his feet, only to lose his balance and roll end over end down the steep to the road below.

"Tally one for Felix!" cried the reckless adventurer, his brown eyes roving swiftly over the slope as though in search of another target, his weapon thrown back until the silversight touched his right shoulder.

Mingling with his cry came other sounds; a deep, threatening roar, rather than shout, as "Baby" John Barcus came rushing up the trail to the spot where the discomfited eavesdropper was lying; and a shrill, wailing shriek as Adine Aymer followed close in his footsteps.

Baby caught the struggling man up in his strong hands, with a mighty heave raising him above his head, ready to dash him down to death or mutilation on the rocky trail as he thundered:

"Say the word, pard!"

"No, no!" panted Adine, clasping her hands about the muscular arm of the enraged giant. "Spare him—it is my poor brother!"

"The devil!" spluttered Baby, instantly lowering his captive until he could look into his face.

One glance was enough. Dirt-soiled, blood-marked though it was, there could be no mistaking the dark face of Bush Clark!

"Let me down!" panted the prisoner, writhing to free himself from that mighty grip. "He shot me—I'll get even, if it takes—"

"Brother—dear Bush!"

"Now I am dumb-fuzzled!"

Felix Bland, pistol still in hand, stepped out into the road, staring in wide-eyed amazement at the man whom his snap-shot had brought down from the rocks above. Stared, brushed his free hand across his brown eyes, to stare and stare again.

"Shall I, pard?" muttered Baby, doubtfully.

"Sure!" was the prompt response. "Put him down before he makes another swap—for I never saw such an immense place for mixing babies up as this same! I pulled on one of the gang, and brought down one of the passengers! Well, well!"

"What was he trying to do up there, anyhow?" suspiciously growled Baby Barcus. "You don't burn powder without a good excuse."

The moment Barcus set Bush Clark free Adine Aymer claimed him, her slender arms hampering him so much that he could hardly have drawn or used a weapon, even should he make the attempt. The little woman who had been so sorely tried that day, who had undergone so much excitement, was sobbing hysterically with her face buried in the bosom of the dark-faced passenger.

"I told you it was foolish, dear brother," came the barely audible words, broken by those sobs. "I knew it was a waste of time, and altogether unnecessary while—while such good friends—as these—"

Bush Clark flashed a swift, sidelong glance into the grave, doubting face of Baby Barcus in answer to that suspicious speech.

"Isn't it plain enough what I was trying? Watching over Mr. Aymer, as in duty bound—as I am paid for doing!"

"And to think I mistook you for one of those infernal road-agents, skulking around for a chance to even up!" ejaculated The Man of Silk, pressing forward and grasping the other by the hand, shaking it vigorously. "How lucky my gun knew better, and—"

"Brother, dear, you are hurt!" gasped Adine, who had shrunk back at the approach of Felix Bland. "There is blood on your face!"

"Only a scratch, madam," bowed The Man of Silk, his voice soft and musical.

"No thanks to you, though!" growled Bush Clark, with a vicious side glance, as one hand went up to his head, gingerly fingering his skull.

"Don't, I beg of you, dear fellow!" pleaded Bland, smilingly. "Don't hold a grudge for a trifle like that. Think how much worse it would have been had you turned out the rascally spy I mistook you for!"

"You might have been killed, dear brother!" "Only if he deserved it, madam," smoothly added The Man of Silk. "I shot to kill if a rascal, to miss if an honest man."

There was a curiously innocent smile in his brown eyes as he uttered these words, and the shadow of a similar smile briefly touched his lips as Baby Barcus bluntly ejaculated:

"Neither killing nor missing proves—what?"

"That my nerves are growing a little shaky; nothing worse, I assure you!" promptly explained The Man of Silk.

Bush Clark laughed shortly, his face clearing up like one who meant to make the best of matters. He faced The Man of Silk squarely, speaking frankly, quickly:

"You're not to blame, and I'm ashamed at having held a grudge against you for even a moment. You acted as you thought right—"

"I always do, dear fellow," laughed Felix Bland, bowing.

"And I was acting on the same principle," persisted Clark. "After all that has happened,

you can't blame me for feeling just a little suspicious, even of you, strangers as you are."

A meaning glance in the direction of Darius Aymer, whose sunken eyes were riveted on the face of Felix Bland with a hungry gaze, pointed his meaning. The smile faded from the face of the adventurer as he bowed again, uttering in an undertone:

"I comprehend. You thought I meant that gentleman evil?"

Adine Aymer, who had stood hesitating between her brother and her husband, seeming at a loss which one most required her care, now gave a little laugh that was not entirely free from hysterical tendencies.

"Was that it, you silly brother? Why did you not trust me more wholly? I could have told you better than that!"

"I told you all I had time for," was the short reply.

"That you deemed it your duty to keep an eye on—him," lowering her soft tones, with a covert glance toward the old man, who clearly noted nothing of what was going on, who had eyes and thoughts for none save the little man in gray.

"You can guess why," said Bush Clark, in the same guarded tones, turning again to The Man of Silk. "Much sorrow and trouble have shaken his strength, so that he is hardly responsible for what he does or says. Still, he seemed to regard you as an enemy, and I felt it my duty to watch over him, though out of earshot, to see that he came to no harm at your hands."

Again that little hysterical laugh.

"Silly boy! would a son hurt his own father?"

"What!" sharply ejaculated Clark, recoiling, his face paling.

The Man of Silk turned quickly toward the little woman, his brown eyes widely opened, his face full of surprise.

And Baby Barcus glanced swiftly from face to face, his own jaws squaring firmly, his big eyes beginning to glow vividly.

"You are Robert Aymer, the long-lost son, who disappeared so mysteriously one dark and stormy night—you frighten me!"

With almost feverish gayety the little woman began, only to stop short and shrink back with a shiver of fear from that steady, burning gaze. She tried to laugh, but it was only the ghost of mirth.

"You surely are not alluding to me, madam?" asked Bland, coldly.

Adine rallied, a slight flush tinging her pale cheeks, as one little hand dived into a pocket, bringing forth a small package. She even laughed softly as her nimble fingers opened the package, extracting a card, which she suddenly held up before that cold, stern-set face.

"Dare you deny it in the face of this picture?"

The keenest eyes could not detect the slightest alteration in that grave face, as the man in gray gazed steadily at the card photograph thus brought to view. He gazed at the sun-picture for a few moments, then lifted his hand and gently took it from her fingers.

Adine laughed nervously, as she added:

"I am foolishly superstitious, perhaps, but something told me that fate would bring me face to face with the original of that picture! I could not believe them when they declared Robert Aymer must be dead, long years ago! I felt that he was still in this world, and see! my faith was well placed—my instincts are proven true! You are Robert Aymer!"

"It does favor me a little, come to look at it closely," quietly uttered The Man of Silk, turning to pass the card to Baby Barcus. "Don't you see the ghost of a resemblance, pard?"

The giant took the photograph in silence, his blue eyes roving swiftly from living face to image. And when he spoke, there was a curious dryness in his tones that drew a quick, covert glance from Clark.

"It might be you, sure enough!"

"Might, but it is not!" retorted Bland, decisively.

"If you say it, she goes, pard," promptly replied Baby Barcus, passing the picture back again.

Scarcely had Felix Bland taken the photograph than it was snatched out of his hand by Darius Aymer, who uttered a low, hoarse cry as his burning gaze rested on the pictured semblance.

"My boy! My poor, wronged lad!"

There were tears in his voice, tears in his eyes as he gazed down upon the pictured image. And there came a sharper, harder ring into the voice of Adine Aymer as she again addressed The Man of Silk:

"Look at him, and deny your identity—if you can!"

"It is a powerful temptation you offer me, madam," smiled Bland, bowing low, then gazing steadily into her blue eyes. "To be your son! Even that relationship is well worth lying for!"

It might have been his tones, or his gaze, for there was nothing in the words alone that could make her shrink back, flushing so vividly.

"It is the truth we want most, and if you are at all human you will attempt no lie!" she mur-

mured, rallying with an effort. "Look at that poor wreck and let your true heart speak. Can it deny him?"

"Couldn't you make it cousin, or something like that?" softly uttered The Man of Silk, his brown eyes looking almost red as they gazed into her flushing and paling face. "Son—even step-son—is so painfully prosaic! And—so hopeless!"

"I don't understand you, sir!" murmured the little woman, shrinking back, something like fright coming into her wide-open eyes.

"Then you and I are working on the same level, for blessed if I've understood a single word you've uttered for the past half-hour!" laughed Bland, all earnestness vanishing in a broad grin of amusement.

"You miserable wretch!" panted Adine, angrily.

"Because I can't pick up a step-mother at a moment's notice?"

She turned her back and stood patting the ground with one little foot after an angry fashion. The Man of Silk watched her, his lips curling, a curious light filling his brown eyes.

Not for long. There was a sudden movement behind him, and as he turned with the celerity of a man whose life has been passed amid perils which called for the promptest action, Darius Aymer dropped to his knees before him, his thin hands clasped, his haggard face wet with the great tears that chased each other downward.

"Robert—poor lad!" he brokenly uttered, his tones full of a yearning sorrow. "Forgive me! I was cruelly harsh, but I was shamefully deceived. I was made to look upon you as ungrateful—as willfully stubborn and lost to all sense of duty. I was even led to believe you the lowest, basest of criminals. Forgive me, my poor boy!"

The Man of Silk smiled pityingly as he caught the clasped hands in his, pressing them reassuringly. His voice was soft and musical as he spoke:

"Of course I forgive you, daddy, if—"

"Thank Heaven! you no longer deny me—your poor father!" gasped the old man, trembling like a leaf, yet with sudden hope lighting up his haggard face.

There was no immediate response. The Man of Silk glanced around him, a rueful smile upon his face, as though half-begging some one to come to his aid.

But no one uttered a word. Each pair of eyes was fixed intently upon his face, with curious intentness. And as he noted this, Felix Bland threw back his head impatiently, dropping those thin hands.

"I'd tell a lie to please you, old man, but if I did, even my old pard would be ready to swear it no more than gospel truth. And I've sins enough of my own to answer for, without shouldering those of a man whom I never met to my knowledge."

"Then you—you—"

"Give me a clew, faint and frail as a gossamer thread, and I'll run your boy down for you, unless he's dead and moldered away in the grave," was the quick, earnest response as The Man of Silk again caught and held those trembling hands in his strong grasp. "I'll be all that a son could be to you, if you wish, until you learn the whole truth; but I've got to draw the line at that, for my own sweet sake."

"I don't—don't understand," muttered Darius Aymer, shaking his white head, a pitiful look creeping into his eyes—a look of dread, of doubt, of almost horror.

"He means to deny that he is Robert Aymer," came the mercilessly clear voice of the little woman as she came forward and stood beside her husband. "He means to deny his father!"

"Your step-son's father, madam, not mine," coldly retorted Bland.

Darius Aymer freed his trembling hands and rose to his feet, his eyes fixed on the face of the man who denied him. Steadily, unflinchingly The Man of Silk met his gaze. There was a certain pity in his brown eyes, but nothing else.

"Robert—my son!"

"I have no father," was the cold response.

"Robert, have pity!" brokenly uttered the old man, his gaunt form shivering as though suddenly exposed to a cutting blast. "If I was too harsh—and I freely admit it—the blame was not all mine. Your mother lied to me, and against you, until—"

"My mother was an angel living, she is an angel now she's dead," was the stern interruption. "Not even your white hairs can protect you, if you dare cast the faintest slur against her memory. For the last time, I tell you I have no father!"

Felix Bland turned on his heel with the air of one who feels that no more need be said, but Darius Aymer caught him by the shoulder, his grip that of a man whose strength was suddenly restored to him. And as The Man of Silk once more faced him, he muttered, hoarsely:

"If prayers and pleading fail to move you, wretched boy, will the curse of a ruined parent have any effect? Must I drag you back to expiate your frightful sins with my own hands?"

Must I give your throat into the hands of the hangman? Robert—my once gay, happy boy! do not drive me to extremity! Once more I kneel to you and—"

Felix Bland flashed a dark glance into the pale, eager face of Bush Clark, saying sternly:

"A bit ago you seemed very anxious to watch over and protect your brother-in-law. He needs your care more than ever, now. Look after him. Try to teach him a little sober reason, and learn him not to run a miserable joke clear into the ground, will you?"

With a hollow groan, Darius Aymer bowed his white hairs to the ground as The Man of Silk turned sharply away. Both Clark and Adine knelt beside him, lifting the poor man up.

"It's mighty curious, pard!" muttered Baby Barcus, covertly watching the hard-set face of the man in gray as they moved over to where their horses were tethered. "I reckon the old gent must be looney?"

"About that," was the terse reply.

"That picture *might* have been you, some years younger."

"Might, but is not. Baby," turning sharply upon the giant, gazing keenly, almost fiercely into the massive face above him, "spit it out! You believe I lied to that poor devil?"

"Say it was all a lie, and I'll believe you, pard," quickly.

"Consider it said, then. I have no father living. I am not that old man's son. Is that plain enough for you—a friend?" with a peculiar emphasis on the title that passed unnoticed as Baby Barcus extended his big right hand, saying frankly:

"Plenty plain—shake, pard! So good. Some day I'll tell you why I crowded you so close on this point. Until that day—"

"Let the matter drop. Hallo, Hungry!" with an entire change of voice as they drew near the stage. "Getting impatient?"

"Never a bit, honey!" grinned the driver, pulling away at his pipe. "All the blame goes on the black-faces, an' the fuder we're behind schedule time, the more cusses they'll fall heir to—see?"

"Good enough!" laughed the little man in gray, falling in with the skinny veteran's humor. "But I reckon we've burned enough daylight for the occasion. Suppose we pull out?"

"I hate to leave pore Old Rocks, but I s'pose he's too hefty fer us to boost on deck; an' the insides mought kick ef he was chucked in 'long o' them!" sighed Hungry Derrick, with a regretful glance at his dead favorite. "Time was—"

"And time is passing in a hurry, old fellow," interposed The Man of Silk, stripping the saddle from his own horse and leading it forward. "Clap the harness on my beast, and play Old Rocks has come back in another hide, can't you?"

Thus matters were "evened up," and when the heavy stage was rolled clear of the dead horse, its substitute was hitched up alongside the other wheeler. Then Felix Bland spoke to Baby Barcus:

"Just tip the wink for the other passengers, pard. They'll take it with a better grace from you, I reckon! Time to pull out for Posey's Pocket, unless we want to sup on wind!"

And two minutes later, with The Man of Silk on the box beside him, Hungry Derrick was sending the team rattling along the trail leading to Posey's Pocket.

CHAPTER VI.

A SHOT FOR A LIFE.

GASPING, panting, like one already in the first throes of death, Red Bergum saw Little Puss arm herself and close the door upon him. He heard her sharp challenge without, and as he began to realize that there was at least a chance for life, the hope he had long since lost began to revive in his breast.

He tried to call out encouragement to this angel of mercy, but only a hoarse, rasping murmured his burning throat. He sought to rise, to creep nearer the door, with the wild hope that his presence would lend her greater resolution in holding back the avengers of blood. But his overtaken muscles refused to obey his will. Utterly worn out with that terrible race against death, he lay in the middle of the floor, panting, shivering, his heart thumping so wildly that to his distracted imagination it seemed to actually shake the stone cabin.

He trembled like a leaf as he caught the sound of Mark Toogood's voice, hurriedly detailing his bloody crimes. He recognized those black charges as only too true, and a horrible fear assailed him lest Little Puss should also recognize and yield to them. If she should—if the one frail barrier between him and the avengers should give way—what hope for him?

Even as he held his gasping breath to listen to her reply, Red Bergum lifted his madly-throbbing head to glare about him in search of some weapon with which he might at least die fighting. But he could distinguish nothing with certainty. All was whirling about him. All was distorted and discolored in that mist—the hue of the blood which he was accused of shedding!

He caught that brave answer—he heard Little

Puss heroically refuse to stand aside and yield him to justice—and the gasping gurgle that escaped his parched lips was intended for a prayer. Not to high heaven, but to the little woman who dared defend a poor, hunted-down wretch like him.

After that, he never doubted her. He knew that she would never betray his trust, and the knowledge served to strengthen him. The red mist began to clear away from before his aching eyes. His brain throbbed and whirled less insanely. His heart gradually resumed its normal speed, and ceased to pound away at his ribs as though trying to reach the light of day.

"She won't let 'em butcher me!" he gasped, lifting his head and turning his face toward the door, beyond which he could hear Little Puss pleading with Mark Toogood for his worthless life. "She's an angel fresh from heaven! She'll win 'em over; even sech desp'rit bloodhounds cain't hold to murder in them glorious eyes! Ef I could only hev knowed a woman like that, mebber I wouldn't 'a' turned out so bad! Mebbe I mought 'a' b'in—they're comin' now!"

It was the sharp explosion as Little Puss sent a bullet whistling past the ear of Mark Toogood, as the surest means of convincing him how thoroughly in earnest were her words, but the miserable wretch felt that his enemies were daring all in their fierce lust for blood.

He struggled to his knees, but could do no more. A gasping moan escaped his bleeding lips as he realized how helpless he was, how unable to even lift his voice in defense of his wretched life.

Like a breath of fresh air to one suffocating, came the next sounds from without. The end was not yet! Little Puss still held the fort.

But, even in his great relief, Red Bergum knew that this was only a respite, not a pardon. The shock served to still further clear his muddled brain.

"She's an angel—but they're devils, an' four to one!" he muttered, clasping his hot, throbbing temples with both hands, collecting his reasoning faculties, steadying his shattered nerves as best he could. "Not even an angel kin choke 'em off long! They want blood, an' they'll hev it, too! Ef I only hed my guns! Ef I only hed a hafe-chance to fight fer my life!"

His bloodshot eyes roved around the dimly lighted room, searching for something with which he might defend himself when the worst should come. A rifle—a pistol—even a knife would be better than nothing; he could win a sudden death with it, and that was far preferable to the rope which Mark Toogood had promised him!

A low, choking cry escaped his lips, though it was no weapon that extorted the sound. On the rude hewn table was a wooden bucket, damp with the water it contained. And for a moment Red Bergum forgot the peril of his life in his intense thirst.

He reached the table, dragging himself up with his hands. He bent over and thrust his head into the bucket, drinking like a famished horse, rather than a human being. And then, panting, sighing with grateful satiety, he stood bathing his head and neck with what water was left after that prolonged draught.

"It's makin' a new man o' me!" he muttered, shaking back the damp locks of red hair, glancing about the room with eyes that saw more clearly than at any time since he was forced to continue his flight on foot, when his stolen horse fell dead beneath him. "I kin see now! I kin see cl'ar a-plenty to send a bullet home to your heart, Mark Toogood! Ef I only hed it—ef I only hed the tools!"

He started away from the table, his limbs trembling and far from steady, though his powers were gradually coming back to him after that horrible thirst had been appeased. He searched the little room for weapons by the aid of which he might even yet baffle his enemies, but all he could find was a long, sharp butcher-knife.

"Better than nothin'!" he muttered, running his horny thumb along the keen edge and over the sharp point. "It'll help to cheat the rope, but it won't reach that merciless hound!" with sudden venom, as he once more caught the sound of Mark Toogood's voice from without.

He turned to the partition which divided the interior into two parts, pushing open the door, only to pause with his foot on the dividing line.

Into his face came a strange look of mingled awe and reverence. He mechanically lifted one hand to his brow, as though to remove a hat. He bowed his head, then turned away, drawing the door to with a slow, gentle movement.

After all, there is a touch of grace in the vilest nature. It would have been no easy task, even in that wild and lawless region, to find another man so utterly worthless, so hopelessly wicked, as Red Bergum. Yet because he saw a bed, a few garments hanging up, a dainty trifle lying here and there, he turned away as though afraid of committing sacrilege should his feet cross that line.

"It's *her* room—the angel o' mercy!" he muttered, with a half-frightened glance toward the door which Little Puss still defended.

Not worth recording? Perhaps.

Red Bergum fell back until he was supported by the heavy table. He still grasped the butcher-knife, but he made no further search for weapons. There were none in that room, and he dared not enter the other, even had his life depended upon so doing.

"He'd send a bolt o' lightnin' to strike me dead the fu'st step!" he muttered, with a shy glance upward and a little shiver.

He waited and listened, giving a start of doubt—of strangely-mingled hope and dread—as he heard the bold, manly voice of Booth Barrett added to the other tones without. He crept toward the closed door and sought for a crack or crevice through which he might catch a glimpse of the new-comer, but in vain. Once he even touched the wooden latch as though to open the door and join his defenders; but he shrunk back with a shudder.

He heard Booth Barrett half-urging Little Puss to give over her mad resolve.

"They'd make a rush ef I was to show up, an' he wouldn't stan' in thar way! He'd think more o' savin' *her*—God bless *her*!"

He turned away, glancing half-doubtingly at the small window in the rear wall. With a noiseless step he approached it, gazing forth, but with wary caution. What if some of his enemies had stolen to the rear of the cabin? What if they were lying in wait for him to expose his face at that very opening?

"They hain't—I'd 'a' hearn somethin' of it from the angel," he muttered at length, gazing breathlessly out along the rough slope which ran backward from the cabin. "Ef I was out thar—their cover enough fer a man to crawl away onsen," he muttered, licking his lips nervously as he turned a strained ear toward the front door.

He caught the stern warning uttered by Mark Toogood, and his resolve was taken then and there.

"They'll close in with a rush, afore long! They won't be choked off much longer, even by *her*. Mebbe I kin git away. It's a chaine, anyway!"

A terribly slim one, even should he succeed in crowding himself through the small window, for the stone cabin was built at a point where the ground rose on both sides, as well as in the rear. No matter in which direction he should try to steal away, he could not go far without coming under range of his enemies below. Unless he was skillful enough to make the scattered rocks, the bushes and straggling trees cover his movements.

The little window had never been glazed, for such luxuries are not readily come at in regions like this. He grasped the strong wooden bars and wrested them from their places. The heavy wooden shutter was already swung back and fastened out of the way.

He listened for an instant at the door, to hear Booth Barrett bidding the enemy defiance, claiming the answer of Little Puss as his own, then he thrust his head through the narrow opening, struggling to compress his broad shoulders, to crowd his body through.

In any less great emergency he must have failed, but he knew that by flight alone could he hope for life, and with his clothes in tatters and his skin broken, scratched, bleeding, he dropped to the ground under the little window.

A few moments for catching his breath, then he stole silently away, casting frequent glances over his shoulders, keeping the little cabin in a line with his enemies, using such cover as promised the best results. And with each yard gained, his hopes ran higher. He was already beginning to laugh with ferocious joy at the thought of so cleverly cheating death, when a wild yell from the rear sent his blood chilling back to his heart.

"Yender he goes! Down him, lads!"

"Take him alive—but take him!" thundered Mark Toogood, leaping forward, forgetting the leveled weapon before the cabin, seeing only the fleeing assassin, thinking only of his dead and crippled mates and the vengeance he had sworn on their account.

"Back!" shrieked Little Puss, striving to regain the aim which she had lost by this sudden and unexpected movement. "Back, I warn you!"

Her rifle exploded, but its lead went humming far away through the air, as a strong hand caught and thrust the muzzle upward.

"For your dear life, hold!" cried Booth Barrett.

"You—you desert me, Booth?" gasped Little Puss, releasing her weapon and shrinking away from her lover with a look of reproach and anger mingled. "You side with them against—"

The young man thrust open the door with a backward kick, catching the maiden in his strong arms and whirling her around and into the cabin, standing before her with his revolver ready for use as the man-hunters came rushing up the slope.

But if they saw him, they heeded him not, just then. Their sole aim was the capture of the fugitive who, his blood chilling at their hot, vengeful cries, was struggling up the rough, rocky slope, once more running for dear life with the odds all against him.

Past the stone cabin they rushed, Booth Bar-

ret giving a great sigh of relief as they vanished from his sight as he stood in the door.

"They're gone—thank Heaven."

"After that poor wretch!" sobbed Little Puss, one hand tightly pressed over her heart, her face pale as death itself. "They'll murder him—and I swore to protect his life with mine!"

Booth Barrett replaced his weapons, and caught the trembling maid in his strong arms, pressing her lovingly to his breast, gently smoothing her jetty curls, his voice low and soothing.

"You did your level best, Little Puss! More than any other woman could or would have done. Your duty ended when that fellow broke away from your protection. He has taken his life in his own hands, now, and whatever happens—"

The sharp crack-crack-crack of firearms cut his words short. And then Little Puss shivered anew as a wild, exultant yell came back to their ears.

"Down he goes! I said he was my meat!"

It was the vicious voice of Dan Orvis that uttered the exultant words.

"Ef you've killed him, I'll kill you!" thundered Mark Toogood.

"Killed be durned," laughed the little miner, venomously. "Not ef he kerries his life whar other men kerries thars! I only knocked his underpinnin' crazy, I tell you. Git thar, Eli. Fu'st hand to grip the dirty whelp—fu'st hand to fit the noose 'round his thrapple."

Wresting free from the arms of her lover, Little Puss sprang to the window through which Red Bergum had taken flight, gazing breathlessly out at the avengers who climbed the slope with redoubled energy, Dan Orvis now in advance, eager to win the terrible privilege named in his last savage speech.

A frightful prize, indeed!

Yet was sufficient to urge each one of the quartette on to redoubled efforts, to make them for the moment insensible to fatigue and stiffened muscles. But Dan Orvis, lighter, with less weight to carry, while his hatred was at least as intense, won the coveted prize—and nearly won death at the same time.

Struck down by one of those shots, his right leg feeling as though it had suddenly dropped from its socket, Red Bergum, snarling like a wounded wild beast, flung his body forward to meet the attack, striking wickedly with the long, keen butcher-knife at the heart of his foe.

Struck—only to fail, for with an eel-like twist, Dan Orvis eluded the blow, then grappled with the crippled outlaw, striving to tear the dangerous weapon from his grasp.

The next moment Mark Toogood was at the spot, and his mighty grasp it was that disarmed Red Bergum; his strong arm that hurled Orvis a dozen feet away; his voice that thundered:

"He belongs to the rope, cuss ye. Would you make me break the oath I tuck over our dead mates?"

"It was his knife, not mine," snarled Orvis, as he spread open the severed clothes and showed a bloody gash over his heart. "Ef you think I lie, look at this, Mark Toogood."

But the burly digger paid no attention to this. He was dextrously tying the hands of their captive, giving a deaf ear to the wild ravings that poured from the frothing lips of the doomed wretch.

"Look up a tree, boys," he said, his tones hard and merciless as he rose from over the now helpless murderer. "I'd take him back to whar Zip Coon is waitin', but we're too nigh tuckered out to tote him, an' he cain't walk, even ef he would."

"I'll ha'nt you all!" gasped Bergum, chokingly.

"The ghosts o' the honest lads you butchered 'll stan' atween us an' your spook, Red Bergum!" grimly laughed the avenger. "Ef they don't—waal, we never feared you livin', so I don't guess we'll trimble much afore you dead!"

"It's murder—give me a chance—give me time—a trial!"

"You're tried an' condemned, Red Bergum," was the icy response. "The last witnesses ag'in' you air Jim Magill an' Tom Magatagan. Both dead—but thar voices is louder than the livin'. They say guilty. The lads you crippled, say guilty. We say guilty. Guilty you hev lived, an' guilty you'll die!"

"Mercy! I'm too wicked—I'm not fit to die!" moaned the miserable wretch, as the shrill voice of Dan Orvis came to them:

"Hyar's the tree! Made to order, it couldn't 'a' bin fittener! Tote him down, yer', but mind! I'm to fit the rope 'round his thrapple!"

Unheeding the cries and ravings of the doomed criminal, Mark Toogood and his mates stooped and lifted their victim between them, bearing him rapidly down the steep slope to the spot where Dan Orvis capered about like one insane with ferocious delight.

"Didn't I tell ye so?" laughed Orvis, making a snatch at the rope which Mark Toogood began uncoiling from his body. "Ain't that a dandy gallows? Couldn't 'a' bin better ef I made it myself!" he chuckled, as he pointed up to the short, stout end of a dead limb that jut-

ted out from the trunk, a score feet above their heads.

This was the scene on which Little Puss gazed with horror in her eyes; and recoiling from the window with her eyes covered with hands that trembled, she gasped:

"Save him! Save that poor wretch, Booth—if you love me!"

"If I only could, Puss!" Barrett muttered, his brows contracting, his face hardened, his jaws squaring as he glanced out of the opening.

"You can—you must! I swore to protect him—do not make me out a base liar!" panted Puss, facing him with flashing eyes. "Are you a man, as I thought you? Dare you stand here idly while a human being is murdered before—*I'll* save him, or share his fate!"

Before Booth Barrett could divine or frustrate her purpose, Little Puss turned and darted out of the room, snatching up her repeating-rifle from where it lay on the ground. A cry of horror broke from her blanched lips as she turned the corner of the cabin.

Red Bergum was being drawn into the air.

"Puss—darling! they will kill you, too!" cried Barrett.

But his voice was drowned by the swift succeeding reports as Puss Curtis opened fire with her repeating rifle.

CHAPTER VII.

BABY BARCUS DEVELOPS.

"DON'T hurry yourself on my account, pard! I could keep up with ye if you didn't go half as fast! And as for dropping anchor: Lord love you, Baby! I'd just as lieve tramp a hundred or two miles before supper, and a little liever if your tastes run in that channel!"

The Man of Silk was speaking, as he trudged along close to the heels of his big comrade of the stage affair—a few hours, in fact, after it.

Twilight was rapidly changing into dust, and already the shadows were making a blur of the shanties, houses and buildings composing the bustling little mining-town known as Posey's Pocket, as Felix Bland cast a backward glance over his shoulder down the slope.

John Barcus came to an abrupt halt and turned about to face his companion. The little man in gray uttered a short ejaculation, a mock injured expression coming into his face.

"You're not going to stop off short already, pard? Just as I'd got fairly wound up for a trip to the hyperborean regions or some other seaport? Do take a little longer tramp, *won't* you? It isn't quite four weeks since I sat down on anything softer than a saddle, or to anything more fattening than a mouthful of wind—dust and alkali thrown in without extra charge! Baby, if you love me, keep a-going!"

John Barcus smiled as he listened to this badinage, but it was only the ghost of the smile. Under the pale light of the recently-risen moon, blended with the last rays of the hidden sun, that faint smile seemed far more a ghost of scorn than a sign of mirth. And something of this appeared to strike The Man of Silk, for his gay air vanished, as he added:

"Then it is business, not an idle whim-wham as I thought, Barcus?"

"Sit down, pard," quietly replied the giant, seating himself on one of two low rocks resting side by side. "Don't fly out if I'm a little slow at first. Everybody can't have your git-up-an'-git-tongue."

"Glad of it, Baby!" laughed The Man of Silk, lightly, as he promptly occupied the other seat. "Haven't got an inch more than I need for my own accommodation! Tongue! great and glorious noon to— But I'm interrupting your flood of tell-a-feller-what-in-blazes-you're-driving-at-anyhow, Baby!"

It seemed a very sluggish flood; for the giant, his chin resting between his palms, his elbows supported on his knees, was staring moodily, vacantly down at the camp of Posey's Pocket.

Under their protection, the stage driven by Hungry Derrick had reached its destination safely, with its living freight on the box-seat and inside.

Bush Clark and the Aymers, husband and wife, left the stage at the Brock House, Bland and Barcus going on to the post-office, where the trip of Hungry Derrick properly ended.

With as little "fuss and feathers" as possible, the story of the outlaw attack and defeat was told, and as soon as they could do so without actual force, the two heroes of the adventure broke away from the enthusiastic crowd. Not to eat, drink and repose, as The Man of Silk seemed to anticipate with delight, for Baby Barcus gravely asked him to take a little walk on business of importance.

The Man of Silk gazed keenly into the face of the big man as this request was made, but keen-witted though he was, he could read no secrets in that cold, almost stolid face.

Baby Barcus led the way out of Posey's Pocket, striding along with legs that quite measured a yard length, out of town and up the gradual slope leading to the north, through the growing shadows of night, in silence, without even a glance over his shoulders to make sure he was being followed—straight on, rough or smooth, steep or level, until The Man of Silk broke out with his ironical speech.

And now the big man sat, staring in silence down at the town below them, yet plainly seeing naught of it. So long thus that Felix Bland was not wholly in jest, as he broke out again:

"Wake me up when Baby begins to sing, will you? I've got a job on tap for the morrow, and I'd rather tackle it with eyes that ain't all gummed up with lack of sleep. Not that I'm hinting at you, pard!" with an airy wave of his hand as the giant turned his face that way with a start. "I'm beginning to feel as though I didn't care a copper if you were to keep silence for the next forty years! Fact—though you may try to believe it an exaggeration!"

Big Barcus leaned forward a little, gazing keenly into the face of his companion, his own countenance grave and stern. The Man of Silk bore this scrutiny with cool composure.

"Not so terrible handsome, pard, but *good!* good, and honest, and manly, and frank and easy-to-be-read, eh?" softly laughed Felix Bland.

"Are you Robert Aymer?" slowly demanded John Barcus.

"Am I the man in the moon, why don't you ask, Baby?"

"Are you Robert Aymer?" repeated the big man, just a little more sharply, his blue eyes beginning to glow through the gloom.

"The same critter has nipped you, too, has it, Baby?" with that same easy laugh that is so irritating to one who wishes to be earnest and frank. "Another county heard from—and it wants a ticket to the very same station! I'm going to sell out and put my little all into Insane Asylum stock!"

"If you *are* Robert Aymer, the sooner you pull out of this the better for you, and the better for me," gravely added John Barcus, making no further attempt to extort an answer to his question. "If you are Robert Aymer, son of Darius Aymer, once from Chicago, this is a mighty unhealthy location for you! Pull out! Don't let the sun shine on you in the morning in Posey's Pocket. If you do—"

"Anything worse than a little tan or a few freckles, think?" coolly drawled The Man of Silk. "I'm proof against sunstroke, you know. Got an accident policy in my pocket."

"Perhaps I'm a fool for—"

"Now, pard," with a piteous tone, one hand softly caressing the nearest broad shoulder. "Don't tell everything you know, even if it has the great advantage of being true. Don't expose yourself. Suppose some stray wanderer should catch your words and plaster them all over Posey's Pocket? Why, I'd have to lay out a dozen stiff before breakfast. For of course I couldn't let it go by that I'd come down to parding with an idiot, you know."

"I know I'm a fool for warning you," gravely resumed the big man, showing neither amusement nor resentment at this prompt catching up and distortion of his words. "I know you will sneer at my weakness if you really are Robert Aymer. But, all the same, I repeat that warning: Get out of the way just as quick as the Lord will let you."

There was an earnestness in this last sentence which Felix Bland could not even pretend to mistake. The smile faded from his face, and a curious glitter came into his eyes as they fairly met those great orbs of steel-blue.

"You just talk as though you meant it, Barcus," he remarked coldly, yet with a certain degree of heat underlying the words. "If you are not the fool you've half-acknowledged, you have some good reason for slinging this warning at my head. Spit it out, won't you?"

"Why not, since I've said so much?" with just the glint of a smile on his massive features.

"You tell! I never try to guess a riddle," with a shrug of the shoulders as he drew back into an easier position. "Only, if I might offer a suggestion, cut it as short as you can, conveniently. I'm very tired and awful hungry."

"Two years ago, more or less, the Merchants' Bank, of Chicago, was robbed of a large sum of money, under rather peculiar circumstances."

"Not a big jump across the line, then?"

Barcus paid no attention to the interruption, speaking gravely:

"Those circumstances, when boiled down and carefully investigated, pointed to the cashier as the criminal. That cashier was Darius Aymer."

"The old gentleman of the stage, to-day?" asked The Man of Silk, his brows arching slightly. "Well, there's nothing so uncertain as a dead sure thing, according to the poet, or philosopher, or somebody else. Now, I actually set that venerable gent down as an escaped lunatic, but if he had brains enough to get away with the vault of a bank, all by his lonesome self, I reckon we'd better alter lunatic to genius. Eh?"

John Barcus gazed at the speaker, something like a touch of contempt in his face. Only for a moment was it perceptible; then, as The Man of Silk uttered that little word of interrogation with a mild perplexity beaming in his brown eyes, the big man resumed:

"He was arrested and tried for robbery. Never mind the details, if, indeed, they are not familiar to you."

"Play they are familiar as Gospel writ, my dear fellow," murmured The Man of Silk, with a languid wave of his brown hand and a longing glance toward the lights of Posey's Pocket. "I am so impatient to—tackle a good, square meal."

"At that trial Darius Aymer proved an *alibi* which could not be broken down, try as they might and did. His guilt was morally certain, but it was impossible to legally prove this. He either robbed the bank-vault himself, or he was aided in so doing by his son, Robert Aymer. If he did not actually steal the money, he lent his knowledge of the combination and such to his son."

"Or, if he didn't do it, he might have done so, had he felt inclined that way. Or, if he didn't feel that way, he'd ought to."

There was a lazy insolence in tone and manner that brought a hot flush to the cheeks of the big man. His hands clinched tightly as they dropped from supporting his chin. But he gave no other signs of being stung by that mocking speech.

"Some reasoned after this fashion, but I firmly believed that Darius Aymer alone was guilty, or, at least, that he was at the head and front of the robbery. I believed this until today, when he met you!"

"When you turned the problem over, adding it up backward to reach an altogether different result?" laughed The Man of Silk.

"There was no acting in his emotion when he saw you. He believed you his son, Robert Aymer. So did his wife. And the picture she showed might easily have been taken from your face, several years ago."

"I believe we decided that question back on the trail," retorted The Man of Silk. "Then you expressed yourself satisfied. Now you seem to hint that I lied in denying that shadow. Next, will you please put your real opinion into words that can be answered plainly, distinctly, and for all time?"

"I was put on the robbery case and told to spare no time, no expense in getting at the bottom facts," resumed John Barcus, without noticing those coldly sharp words. "As I said, my belief was that the head spirit in the affair was Aymer himself. I believed that he was playing a cunning part, to ward off suspicion until he could steal away to some remote quarter where he could enjoy the fruits of his enterprise. And for this reason I have shadowed him from that day to this, so adroitly, if I do say it myself, that he has not the faintest suspicion of the fact."

"I have pledged my professional honor to bring out the bottom facts. I believed that I could strike the criminal when and wherever I met him with the proofs fairly in my possession, but—"

"Your nerve is giving way," softly uttered The Man of Silk, as the big man paused, his voice growing slightly unsteady.

"You have treated me white, pard," earnestly added John Barcus. "I'd rather arrest a brother, I verily believe! But if you are Robert Aymer—if you are the son of Darius Aymer—keep out of my reach from this hour on! I may relent—professional pride may get the better of the friendship I've learned to feel for you—and then I'll have to run you in!"

"If I What a mighty big-little word!" laughed The Man of Silk. "If I was Robert Aymer, gritty as most bank-robbers are, you'd lose the trail right here—and thus!" as with a swift motion he covered the big detective with a brace of cocked revolvers. "As a proof that I am not the man you take me for—see!"

Deftly the weapons swung around until the butts were toward John Barcus, The Man of Silk laughing softly as his brown hands lightly grasped the polished barrels, with just a trace of scorn in his voice:

"You're barking up the wrong tree, Baby! I'm bad enough when you shake the bottle hard, no doubt, but I draw the line at stealing, even though it be a bank and its wealth. If you still doubt, take my guns and run me in so quick it'll make my head swim!"

"Then you are not Robert Aymer? Not the thief, first or second?"

"I'm not Robert Aymer! I'm not the robber! Nor do I believe the old gent is, though his son may possibly be the criminal. If I was to back my opinion, though, with rocks, I'd rather lay my ducats against—talk of the devil and you'll begin to smell brimstone!"

The Man of Silk quickly drew back his weapons, slipping them in place with a swift glance down toward the town, where his keen, ever-watchful eyes had detected the coming of a man, headed in their direction.

"It looks like Bush Clark, as he now calls himself!" muttered John Barcus, following the eyes of his companion.

"And looks don't always lie, to-day's events to the contrary notwithstanding," laughed Felix Bland. "It is indeed our gentle brother of the hearse! Foolish fellow! What if he should catch cold in that awkward crease my awkward hand gave him? Think of that dainty little angel in mourning! Forbid it, saints!"

"Hallo!" called out the dark figure below them, hesitating, as if fearful of an unpleasant

greeting should he venture nearer without warning. "If Mr. Bland is up there, I've got a message for him!"

"Advance message, and bring the bearer with you!" called out The Man of Silk, turning so as to fairly face the new-comer.

"Thanks!" said Bush Clark, coming forward, hurriedly adding: "By pure luck I happened to catch a glimpse of you coming in this direction, and when I failed to discover you in town, I came this way."

"On important business, of course? Otherwise you would hardly dare interrupt a love feast like ours. But to business, if you please, sir!"

Even in the comparative gloom the hot flush that leaped into the messenger's face could be detected, and he tersely retorted:

"It is not for my own sake that I intrude on your privacy, be sure of that, sir! I am sent by Darius Aymer, to remind you of your promise to grant him an interview. He wishes to see you at once."

"You mean as soon as my convenience will admit, of course. You should improve your recent opportunities better, my dear fellow. Though you move in greatly elevated circles from those I last saw you ornamenting, your manners are still painfully rude and unpolished."

CHAPTER VIII.

A GRATEFUL RASCAL.

FOR an instant Booth Barrett stood like one petrified, staring at Little Puss who was working her Winchester with a frantic rapidity, her face ghastly pale, though her eyes glowed with a light that seemed almost insanity.

"Puss, they'll murder you!" and the lover sprung forward, only to see the brave girl drop her rifle and sink to the ground with a choking cry.

From up the slope came cries and curses of mingled surprise and anger, but not a shot had as yet answered that wild fusillade.

Even Mark Toogood had for the time being forgotten the very existence of the lovers, in his fierce thirst for vengeance on the slayer of his mates. And his strong hands held the writhing wretch upon his bound feet while the other avengers ran away with the slack of the rope, then slowly, mercilessly dragged the doomed criminal from the ground into the air.

He might not have noticed that wild, choking cry, had it not been so swiftly followed by the rapid shots. As it was he had not time to turn his eyes toward the stone cabin before a strange event occurred.

Red Bergum fell heavily to the ground—Dan Orvis and his mates tumbled over each other with yells of angry amazement.

Accidentally or otherwise, one of Little Puss's bullets had cut the tightly-strained rope!

And then—

"Hands up and empty, you curs!"

Mark Toogood whirled swiftly at that sharp, significant challenge, one hand dropped instinctively to the weapon at his waist. But before his fingers could close upon pistol-butt or knife-haft, a sharp report stung out and a bit of lead tore its way through his flowing beard, giving him a stinging twitch as it carried a lock with it.

"Hands up, not down, you idiot!" added that stern voice, and now Mark Toogood caught sight of the speaker; a man with face hidden from view by a black mask and hood combined; with gloved hands clasping twin revolvers, both of which bore fully upon his breast.

And even as he saw this much, he saw more. There seemed to be men in masks, men with pistols and men with rifles, springing up everywhere, like the fabled crop of dragon's teeth!

"The dog's dead, pard, and if you ain't a bigger fool than your face says, you'll pay the doctor off and let him slide. You fools!" with a vicious snarl as the men with the bullet-severed rope in their hands struggled to their feet and seemed about to draw their weapons. "Must I bore for common sense with a gun? Can't you see we've got you dead to rights? Hands up, or we file a mineral claim on each and every one of you in a holy second!"

"They've got us, lads—give in!" growled Mark Toogood, raising his hands high above his head, his bronzed face turning as pale as the coating of tan would permit; but not through fear.

He cast a swift, deadly glance toward Red Bergum, who was recovering from the shock of his fall and the hanging combined. If he could only make sure of that vile wretch first!

"A couple of you slip around behind the gentlemen and relieve them of those ugly toys. Needn't to dodge if you hear the music open. You know what fingers will be picking the triggers."

The masked chief was promptly obeyed, and deft hands relieved the surprised avengers of their weapons, stripping off belts and all as the speediest method of gaining their ends. And then, with a mocking laugh, the outlaw added:

"Kick their heels from under them, lads, but pick out soft spots for them to lie down on—sol!" laughing again as one after another of the miners were rudely dropped to the ground, face

downward. "Handle them carefully, boys. Don't even hurt their feelings, if you can help it. Let them see we are gentlemen, if we are too handsome for the sun to shine upon. And while you're about it, just fasten their hands so they won't drop off and get lost."

With one black mask to each of the miners, kneeling upon their backs and deftly tying their hands behind them, Mark Toogood and his mates groaned and cursed beneath their breath with impotent anger. If they had been more on their guard! If they had only killed Red Bergum when their hands first fastened upon him.

"Wonder whatsort of water-haul we've made, anyhow?" distinctly uttered the mask who appeared to be the chief of the party, passing over to where Red Bergum was striving to raise himself to a sitting posture, but failing in his efforts, thanks to his having turned head downhill in falling. "One of our sort—blessed if it is, though!" with a sniff of disgust as he caught sight of the fellow's face. "It's a clear give-away, pards! Powder wasted for worse than nothing!"

"Ain't it one o' our boys?"

"I'd blow my brains out if I had to say yes!" was the disgusted retort, as the chief rudely stirred Red Bergum with his toe. "Nothing but a stray chicken or hog-thief, from the smell of him!"

"Don't hang me, boss!" gasped Red Bergum, huskily. "I've went through wuss then a thousand deaths a'ready!"

"Then one more won't make any difference," with a short laugh. "If these fellows have any good case against you, reckon I'll turn 'em loose long enough to finish up the job they begun. I can't ask any of my friends to soil their hands with such truck!"

"Hang him, and then do what you want with us!" panted Mark Toogood, with vicious energy. "So he croaks, I don't keer what comes o' me!"

"Don't do it—don't do it!" shivered Red Bergum, shrinking as far away as the nature of his bonds would admit. "Or—if I must die the death of a dog, let me hev time to thank the angel—God bless her! She saved me twicet—she cut me down when I was hangin' an' chokin'! I see her shoot—I hearn the twang o' the bullet as it cut the rope over my head! Give me time to thank her, anyhow!"

"Is that it?" ejaculated the mask, with a prolonged whistle of surprise as his gaze turned toward the little stone cabin below. "The little lady was wasting her ammunition on you, was she? And I all the time thought it was for our benefit—or, rather, to open the eyes of these fine gentlemen to our ambush! Well, I don't know," in a dubious tone. "If she's so friendly to you, maybe she'll welcome us with the business end of that rifle."

Mark Toogood laughed bitterly.

"That won't wash, durn ye! All your pretendin' cain't rub it out that Red Bergum is one o' your gang, an' tarred with the same stick!"

"You are entirely too smart, Mister Man, for your own good. Clap a stopper on their jaws, lads, and never mind if you do stretch their muscles a little. They'll hardly have time to get sore," sharply cried the chief, plainly irritated by this blunt accusation.

Rough-and-ready hands soon gagged the miners, and while they were thus engaged, the chief stooped and with a keen knife soon set Red Bergum at liberty. Either he had grown tired of playing a part, or else he decided it was of no use after that blunt speech, for now he spoke to the almost-hanged man as a partner in crime.

"Who was that fellow with the girl, Red? Any trouble from that quarter, think?"

"Not unless you try to harm the lady, boss; an' then I'd be at your throat even quicker'n he would!"

"Struck all of a heap, eh?" with a short, ugly laugh.

"She saved my life," doggedly muttered the rascal, his bloodshot eyes growing dimmer. "She faced them devils as no man would 'a' dared to face 'em. She swore they shouldn't take me, unless they crawled over her corpus fu't. An' then—you see her shoot me down when I was hangin'—chokin' wuss then a dog!"

"Little Puss is no slouch, I admit that," with a softer laugh. "But that fellow with her: who is he?"

"I hearn her call him Booth," was the slow, hesitating reply.

"I thought so. He isn't satisfied with his game in town; but must try to win the Pride of Posey's Pocket as well. Perhaps he may slip up on it, just when he feels most sure of success at both ends."

Red Bergum made no reply to these muttered words, but there came a red light into his eyes, a dogged expression into his face. By her actions that day, Puss Curtis had made a friend who would wade through fire and water for her sake. Low, degraded, evil though he undoubtedly was, Red Bergum could feel grateful.

"All right, Reddy, my lad," cried the masked chief with sudden gayety, turning and locking arms with the ragged wretch. "We'll stroll down to the palace and I'll help you to thank this angel of yours. She served me and the

rest, in serving you, though probably she didn't realize that important fact at the time. As for Booth Barrett—Lucky Barrett o' Sure-to-fill—maybe he'll be kind enough to sit the game out without insisting on taking a hand in. If he should—well, I'm no slouch on the draw, myself."

The muzzle of a rifle was thrust through the open window at the rear of the house, and a sharp, stern voice uttered the challenge:

"Not too close, my fine fellows, if you please! There's room enough and to spare, without your trespassing on this claim!"

"Flag o' truce, Lucky Barrett!" carelessly retorted the man in the mask, flinging up his free hand, but halting short as he spoke. "We don't want to intrude, but this gentleman swears he can't rest easy until he's had a chance to thank Miss Curtis for saving his life from those hot-heads up yonder."

"I wish no thanks," uttered Puss, appearing at the window, one hand pushing aside the weapon her lover held. "While I am not sorry I saved his life, I could almost curse the day that led him here! My friends up yonder—if you are a man, spare their lives!"

"What do you say to that, pard?" turning to Bergum, who hesitated, his eyes drooping, his tongue moistening his cracked lips.

Puss Curtis leaned out of the window, her face flushing brightly as she spoke rapidly, earnestly:

"You say you are grateful to me for what I have done?"

"I'm your dog, miss, from this day on!" impulsively cried the ragged rascal, his voice hoarse and trembling with emotion, his face filled with an almost slavish idolatry. "I ain't fitten to kiss the dirt your foot leaves a print in, but I'd do it, gladly! If ever the time comes when I kin, I'll prove my gratitude. If ever the time comes—"

"It has come!" with increased earnestness. "Set those poor men at liberty! Give them their lives, even as I have given you yours! Or if you are afraid to do that, go away and leave me to cut their bonds when you have had time to reach a place of safety! Do this, and—"

"If the boss is willin' to do it, I am," slowly replied Bergum.

"Let me add my word to hers," said Booth Barrett, his face appearing at the window beside that of Little Puss. "Don't stain your hands with their blood, if only for your own sake. You're no fool, whatever else you may be. You're smart enough to know that blood calls for blood. That if you wipe out Mark Toogood and his mates, the whole country will spring to arms and never rest until they are most thoroughly avenged. Let them go, and call it a drawn game!"

The man in the sable mask laughed, shortly, half mockingly.

"Don't you think you are taking a good deal for granted, young fellow? To hear you, one would think you were talking to a set of professional butchers, instead of gentlemen out on a simple lark!"

"Put it how you will, just so you let them go free."

"Do it, and I'll make them swear to never trouble you again!" impulsively cried Little Puss, hope filling her face and making it even more than ordinarily beautiful.

"Don't, if you love me!" laughed the road-agent, with a deprecatory wave of his gloved hand. "I wouldn't have them choked off for all the gold ever taken out of Posey's Pocket! It's fun for us! We grow fat on it. Why, we'd grow blue-moldy for lack of exercise were you to swear the bloodhounds off from hunting us!"

Little Puss shrunk back, trembling, her fears returning at that mocking speech. Booth Barrett grasped his rifle, his voice ringing out hard and stern:

"Let them go, and all is well. Refuse—well, I've got them under the muzzle of my rifle, and I'll make it mighty hot for all who try to harm them, or to lead them away!"

"Spare your threats until they're asked for, Lucky Barrett," coldly retorted the road-agent. "I set those rascals free because the fancy strikes me, not because of anything you say or may do. I turn them free, on one condition: you and the lady swear that neither one of you will touch them after we leave. They brought a rope with a noose in it, and I've sworn to send them back with its mate. Swear this, or I'll hang them one and all right before your eyes!"

"You'll let them go alive?"

"Of course," with a hard laugh. "I want them to be a walking sign to their fellows. Take the oath, or up a tree they climb, head-first!"

"I swear—for the lady and myself. Now keep your word!"

The road-agent turned on his heel and strode back up the hill, accompanied by Red Bergum. The lovers watched them anxiously, doubtfully, drawing a full breath of relief as they saw the outlaws set the miners' feet at liberty, then march them down past the cabin.

"Turn them free here, why don't you?" demanded Barrett, standing in the front door, rifle in hand, ready for use should the occasion arise.

"I want them to understand that they will gain nothing by turning back to you," coldly replied the outlaw, then briefly mentioning the oath he had exacted from the lovers as the price of their lives.

Down to the foot of the slope they moved. Then, with a lariat which one of their number had provided himself with, by a hasty trip to their concealed animals, the captives were stood up and tied in pairs.

The noose was drawn snugly about the throat of Mark Toogood. Another loop was formed just far enough from the first to drop neatly over the head of the man who stood at his side. Behind them at a short stride's distance stood the other pair, who were ornamented after the same fashion.

While the chief arranged the nooses with his own hands, others of the band were tying the left leg of Mark Toogood to the right leg of his mate, just below the knees, securing Dan Orvis and his partner after the same fashion. Their arms were left bound behind them, and the gags still distended their jaws.

"I reckon that'll answer!" laughed the road-agent, drawing back to view his work with head cocked on one side. "Tell your fellows that we had no use for such truck. Bid them send men after us the next time. And just add, will you, that the next batch will have a tall tree fastened to each and every noose our hands fashion! So-long, gents! Ta, ta!"

And they swiftly glided away, vanishing amid the rocks as the four bound men slowly, painfully moved away down the valley, Little Puss gazing after them through her tears of sympathy, until—

A volley of shots rung out, and with wild cries, the four men went down in a struggling heap.

CHAPTER IX.

A DISTRACTED PARENT.

NOT in the words alone, but in the tone and manner of uttering them, lay the sting that made Bush Clark clench his fists and grate his strong teeth.

"Do you mean to insult me?" he grated, his voice low and strained.

The Man of Silk stared at him with arched eyebrows, his bearded lips curling with languid amusement.

"What do you take me for, anyhow? One of those awfully mysterious fellows who go about with a pocketful of miracles, changing black to white and green to blue by a simple twist of the wrist? Insult you, my dear boy? Do I look like one who would attempt the plainly impossible? Now, do I?"

"It sounded like an insult, but let it pass. What answer shall I take to Darius Aymer from your lips?"

"As I look at the matter," lazily added The Man of Silk, his gaze turned reflectively toward the sky, where the stars were beginning to twinkle merrily, despite the light of the moon. "From my standpoint, there is a line fence drawn through the crowd. On one side stand such as are impervious to insult, because they are high beyond its reach. On the other, too low down in the mud and mire for the scorn of an honest man to reach them, are those even further removed from insult, because they are entirely too mean and contemptible and all that's vile and loathsome. There's a moral somewhere about this, old fellow, if you care to look for it. I'm too tired to point it out any clearer."

John Barcus was watching this little by-play keenly, intently, holding himself in readiness to interfere the instant matters began to look too risky. He could not help seeing how sharply Bush Clark was stung by that lazy, careless treatment, and knowing the reputation he had borne in the long-ago, he expected a passionate retort, in deeds if not in words alone.

But in this he was mistaken. Perhaps had the two men been alone on that slope, with no witness to tell tales afterward, something tragic might have followed, for Bush Clark was pale as death, his black eyes were glowing redly, his voice was harsh and unnatural as he said:

"Maybe I'll ask you to say that again, and slower, one of these days, sir. Just now, as you know, my hands are bound."

"With fetters of love, or bracelets of cold steel, Horatio?"

A short, sneering laugh parted the lips of Bush Clark as he said:

"That shows the course your thoughts are most familiar with, Robert Aymer!"

"You don't know him by that name?" sharply interposed Barcus, rising to his feet, leaning forward and gazing intently into that face.

"Just tit for tat, you know," with a mocking bow. "He calls me out of my name, and I call him—Robert Aymer. See?"

"Plagiarizing the gentle lunatic of the hearse?" drawled The Man of Silk, with a low, soft laugh.

"Is there nothing original about your clothes, Horatio, except the way you spell your name? Or was it *your* name? A name, I know, but—well, life is too short for wasting precious moments over a trifle of that sort! Many a poor devil has done the same thing in a fit of absent-mindedness, and without a particle more malice than—the gentleman of whom I happened to be

thinking when you chanced to cross my vision, Mr. Clark," with a profound bow.

"You come from Mr. Aymer, I think you said?" interposed Barcus.

"I did. He begged me to find the man who gave the name of Felix Bland, and beg him to call as early as possible at the hotel. As I am in his employ, I had to obey, agreeable or not. I have delivered my message. Good-evening, to you both!"

"Pray don't be in such a rush, Mr. Clark," softly cried The Man of Silk. "There are so many rocks and bushes lying around loose on the trail to Posey's Pocket that I'm actually afraid I might stumble over you in picking my way through them—and one of us would come to grief, to a moral certainty!"

"Don't let me keep you, pard," gravely uttered Baby Barcus. "I've said about all I need to say. You know the sort of cards I hold, and can use your own judgment about the hint I gave you."

"I'll never jump the game, Baby, because I don't have to—see?" was the light response.

"Then you don't—"

"See the use in keeping Mr. Clark waiting a moment longer. I'll look you up before turning in, Barcus, unless I break my precious neck in descending this mountain. At your service, most noble messenger! Be so kind as to lead the way, will you? My eyesight is growing dim, and I'm not sure I could pick the right course quick enough to keep you from tramping on my heels—and that I do detest!"

"I'll keep you company to the edge of the Pocket, anyway," quickly uttered John Barcus, his big blue eyes roving swiftly from one face to the other, as though striving to read what lay below the surface.

"Heaven reward you for your delightful forethought, pard!" murmured The Man of Silk, as they began the descent. "I wanted to beg just such a favor, but I was afraid you'd think I was afraid. Of course that is a ridiculous idea. I don't know the meaning of the word. It's only that I've got a sensation as though somebody was ramming a knife into my back by horsepower, and turning the blade with a shaft and crank like that of a monster grindstone! Foolish! Yes, but uncomfortable!"

"Foolish indeed!" muttered Clark, with a thinly-disguised sneer.

"I believe I intimated something of the sort," smoothly added The Man of Silk. "Don't be an echo, dear boy, unless you can be an echo with variations and improvements. It's decidedly low. It's vulgar. It's bad breeding showing in a worse light. And sometimes it's dangerous!"

"What's got into you youngsters, anyway?" demanded John Barcus, stopping short and eying them curiously. "If there's anything under this snip-snapping, why don't you square off and have it out without wasting so much breath?"

"Shall we oblige the infant, Mr. Clark?" blandly asked The Man of Silk, smiling broadly, although the suggestion was a far from disagreeable one to his mind. "Not to bloody murder each other, of course, for it would be a burning shame to make that dainty lady go into mourning for— Was it *brother* she called you, dear fellow?"

Bush Clark was white as marble as he retorted:

"You are trying to pick a row with me, I see. Well, I'll meet you when and where and how you choose—after you prove Darius Aymer wrong when he says you are his son."

"I beg of you don't let that faint, far-off tie restrain your vengeance, dear boy," laughed The Man of Silk.

"It's not that. But if you are Robert Aymer—"

"Then the lovely Adine will be my step-mother, you will be my step-uncle, and Baby, here, will be—what?"

"Blessed if he won't be after licking you both at once if you don't dry up and come along like white men," was the impatient interruption; but the big detective was not near so careless as he seemed.

There was a growing doubt visible in his blue eyes as he covertly scanned the smiling face of the little man in gray. There was a growing shade on his broad face, that told he was far from feeling satisfied with his thoughts.

"That settles it, then," laughed The Man of Silk, moving on again. "When Baby speaks, he generally says something. And though I might pluck up courage enough to tackle an ordinary mortal, I'm not taking any man-mountain in mine, if you please."

Bush Clark said nothing, but led the way rapidly into town and up to the door of the Brock House. He turned sharply as he heard Baby Barcus check The Man of Silk with a word, and there was a dark, uneasy frown upon his face as he watched them by the light which streamed out of the office windows.

"What I said up yonder goes, pard," the big detective muttered in guarded tones. "I'm a fool for my pains, whichever way the matter turns out, but you've treated me white, and I had to give you the chance."

"Which was wholly unnecessary, Baby; but thanks, all the same."

"You know who I am now. You know what brings me here. I've got to perform my sworn duty, even if it cuts close to friendship. If you are Robert Aymer, skin out of this in a hurry!"

"And so tell you flatly just where and who to strike at? Supposing Robert Aymer to be the guilty one, of course. Wouldn't that be just a little foolish, Baby? Wouldn't a game of bluff give more show for a touch at the pot?" half-mockingly replied Bland.

"Settle that as you please," coldly. "I've gone as far as I dare go, and much further than I should, as a sworn officer of the law. Take my friendly warning, or neglect it, just as you think best. Whatever comes of it, you can't blame me."

"I thank you instead, old fellow," and The Man of Silk grasped his hand warmly. "None the less that you are barking along the wrong trail this bout. I'm not Robert Aymer, if Robert Aymer robbed the Merchants' Bank of Chicago. Is that plain enough for you, pard?"

"Shall I tell Mr. Aymer you are coming, or not?" impatiently interrupted Bush Clark, his voice hard and disagreeable.

"Coming, Horatio o' the Nimble Pen! So long, Baby! I beg of you, eat a pound or two of substantial to stay my poor stomach until I can surround the rations myself. I'll starve, else! Coming, dear Horatio!"

"Call me by my name, or not at all, curse you!" growled Clark.

"Which one of them?" was the swift retort, as The Man of Silk gained the side of the messenger, his brown eyes filled with a peculiarly mocking light, a broad smile upon his face.

"My name is Bush Clark. I have no other."

"Why don't you advertise for them, then? Never mind offering a reward. Whoever is unlucky enough to pick them up, will gladly get rid of them without asking for pay!"

"If you will force a row on me, all right!"

"If it isn't right, I'll make it right; but sleep on it first, my boy—sleep on it first! And, if you could manage to decide which one of your names you'd rather be carved under, maybe it would save trouble and mistakes in arranging for the funeral. Tombstones come mighty high in Posey's Pocket, now I tell you!"

Low and guarded though their tones had been through all, their words had attracted attention, several men in the office and bar combined, stepping forward with awakened curiosity. Bush Clark saw this, and his right hand dropped from his bosom whither it had stolen. He forced a smile, and managed to utter:

"You will have your joke, let it rub what it may! All right the old gentleman is waiting. Will you go up to his room at once?"

"If he expects me there, of course," quietly replied The Man of Silk, for whatever his real purpose, it was not to come to an open row with the man he mocked so sharply, just then and there.

Bush Clark passed up the narrow stairs, pausing to rap at a door.

"Is it you, Clark?" came a cold, stern voice.

"Have you found him? If not, go back, and—"

"Mr. Bland is waiting your pleasure, sir."

"Then come in."

Clark opened the door, motioning Felix Bland to enter. The Man of Silk obeyed, doffing his hat as he crossed the threshold, casting a keen and comprehensive glance around the small chamber.

"If there is anything more, brother—"

"Nothing save to take yourself off. Shut the door behind you. If I want you for anything, I'll call."

Cold, hard, very unlike the voice or tones of the broken-down old man whom he met at the "holding up" of the stage, but still the same being, as The Man of Silk could see. Apparently Darius Aymer had prepared himself for this interview, steeling his nerves like one who feels all depends on that turn of the cards.

He sat beside a small stand, bearing a lighted lamp and materials for writing. A chair was placed on the opposite side of the stand, to which he motioned The Man of Silk, as he spoke:

"Sit down. I thank you for coming so promptly."

"Don't care if I do," smiled Felix Bland, slipping into the seat and dropping his hat to the floor. "Came in such a hurry that I forgot to bring my supper with me, and my stomach's so light I need a chair-back to keep me from toppling over backward."

Darius Aymer frowned darkly at this flippant remark, and a far less acute mind than that of the man who sat opposite him, could have read his growing uneasiness.

"You can give a thought to such silly trifles, when I am suffering such wretchedness?"

"Well, you see, it's my stomach," hesitated Bland, with a faint smile. "And naturally one is more nearly concerned about his own troubles than those of an entire stranger, although—"

"You are still obdurate? You persist in denying your name?" sharply uttered Darius Aymer, leaning across the table, his sunken eyes glowing vividly, his face flushing with anger. "Have you no spark of mercy—no touch of remorse in that wicked heart?"

"I give it up—make your own trump, please," murmured Bland, with a shrug of his shoulders, a half-pitying smile on his face.

"I will make one more appeal, though it seems hopeless. Look at me, and try to recall my face, my figure, my hairs, as they were when you fled in the night from my house. Do you see the change?"

"Wonderful! I could almost believe you were becoming a youth again—getting into your second childhood, as it were!" softly uttered The Man of Silk, his brows arching, his face full of innocent surprise.

"And all for you. All on your account, Robert Aymer," passionately cried the old man, the great veins swelling on his temples, his face almost purple. "Then—I was strong, healthy, honored and respected throughout the land. Then I could look any man in the eye, without flinching. Then I need not hang my head and blush for shame when I heard the name my fathers bore passing the lips of strangers."

"Now—look at me! Old and broken down, long before my time. My head whitened with grief and shame. My name a byword for scoffers. And all for you—all for you!"

"You mean all for Robert Aymer, I reckon," quietly said Bland.

"Dare you deny your name to my very face?" fiercely cried the old man, drawing his gaunt frame erect, his eyes all aglow. "Dare you look me in the eye and say that a father does not know his son? God! with a deep, shivering groan as his head drooped almost to the table. "That I should have to say it! That I should have to claim a vile, unrepentant criminal as a son!"

"Well, it does sound a little tough, that's a fact," was the deliberate response. "You don't have to, do you? Then I wouldn't."

"You dare to mock me, after all I have suffered—after all I am suffering even yet—on your account?" grated Darius Aymer, once more the stern, almost fierce accuser. "Is it not enough that I am driven from home, an exile, a wanderer on the face of the earth, without friends, without honor, without a hope—unless I can touch your hardened heart or stir your conscience into making what poor reparation can be made at this late day? Is all this not enough without your mocking me to my face?"

"Well, it sounds rather hard, I admit, but what can I do to help you? I've sinned enough of my own committing, without confessing to those another fellow is responsible for. If I was really your son—"

"Dare you deny that you are Robert Aymer, my criminal son?"

"I told you once I was not Robert Aymer. I repeat that assertion. I have no father living," was the cold, hard response.

With a hoarse, inarticulate cry, Darius Aymer thrust a revolver almost into the face of The Man of Silk, his face convulsed with mad passion and despair. He grated savagely:

"Confess, or die! Admit that you committed the crime for which I have to suffer, or son though you be, I'll save the hangman a job!"

"A fine-looking gun; what did it cost you?"

Cool, unshaken the tones. Without flinching an atom, without changing a muscle, The Man of Silk gazed across the deadly weapon into the purple face of the old man opposite. It was a marvelous exhibition of nerve, for he must have seen the lifted hammer, the finger bent around the trigger, a simple contraction of which would send the lead crashing through his brain.

But it was a coolness with a purpose, and it won!

Darius Aymer was startled, his overwrought brain thrown off its balance for an instant. Long enough for a man like Felix Bland. Long enough for him to jerk his head out of range, to reach out and insert his thumb between the hammer and the cartridge. Then a quick twist of his steel-like wrist wrenched the dangerous tool away, a soft laugh escaping his lips, as he said, half-sneeringly:

"Never take the drop until you're ready to improve it on the very instant, my dear sir! That's the regulation style among gentlemen who are really fit to carry guns: pull and pull, the two in one time and one motion! See?"

Apparently Darius Aymer did not hear or understand his terse explanation. His face turned ghastly white, but it was not through bodily fear, though The Man of Silk was deftly toying with the confiscated weapon, illustrating his little lecture as delivered. He leaned across the table, his voice husky, pitiful, pleading as a man might plead for dear life when it hung trembling in the balance.

"Robert—son! by the memory of the happy past, I beg of you to show me mercy! Lift this crushing weight from my life! Do not send me to the grave in disgrace! I know I wronged you bitterly in the past, but I will make amends—I will beg your pardon on my bended knees if that will soften you! Anything, only confess that you sinned, not I!"

"And swear to a lie? Hang for your son? Isn't that a little too much to ask, after trying to murder me? You might coax me, but—"

"How is this for persuasion, then?" cried a clear musical voice, as a door flew open, revealing Adine Aymer with a pistol in each hand.

CHAPTER X.

POSEY CURTIS AT THE HELM.

"It is murder—murder most foul!" chokingly cried Little Puss, staggering back and covering her face with both trembling hands, to shut out that sight.

Feeling almost as guilty as though she had with her own hands put this shame and ignominy upon those four men whose only sin was that they sought to execute justice on the guilty, where law there was none save such as this, she watched Mark Toogood and his mates as they passed slowly, painfully down the little valley, making no effort to secure relief by even mutely soliciting her to break the oath which the road-agents had extorted. Through hot, indignant tears she watched them, beginning to doubt the wisdom of the course she had so impulsively taken. She had saved a human life, but was it worth all this?

Worn and jaded, held up so long only by the mad flames of hatred and a longing for vengeance, could they reach a place of safety thus cruelly hampered? Could they hope to find succor, such as was denied them here? Would they not falter and fail—go down in despair, to die a horrible death—to starve, to perish of thirst, to—

"It is too, too horrible!" she murmured, trembling like a leaf in the strong arm of her lover. "It is no sin to break such a vile oath! I will—"

And as she started to break away from that firm, yet loving clasp, that volley of rifle-shots rung forth, and she saw the four miners go down in a struggling heap!

A grating curse broke through the tight-clinched teeth of Booth Barrett as he caught at the sinking figure of Little Puss, even his ardent love being unable to keep his flashing eyes from dwelling on that writhing mass of humanity.

The frown on his face grew blacker as he heard a wild, mocking chorus of laughter come from up the west hillside—from the point whence had sped that treacherous volley of lead.

Little Puss heard it, too, and that sickening faintness was driven away by a burst of hot indignation. She regained her balance, and one hand closed on the barrel of the repeating rifle still held by Booth Barrett.

"The cowardly assassins!" she panted, her eyes blazing fire, her face white as that of a corpse, as she struck down the hand which Booth Barrett instinctively thrust out to bar her passage. "To shoot them down like mad wolves! To—"

"What would you do, Puss?" muttered Barrett, as the half-frantic girl sprung outside the cabin, Winchester in readiness for use. "You are mad, girl!" with a trace of anger in his tones. "They'll kill us both, and that won't help those poor devils in the least! Come back!"

"Through me they suffered—only for me they would never have been taken by those merciless fiends! Only for me—"

A sharp report cut short the choking speech, and, with something of the fierceness a wounded tigress might have displayed in defense of her threatened cubs, Little Puss turned in that direction, the Winchester leaping instinctively to her shoulder.

"Thar they be!" rung out a stentorian voice a second later, and another shot stung out from the rocky slope above the fallen four. "Slam it into 'em! Spread out an' surround the bloody varmints! Don't let a durned one git away! Cut loose and blow 'em to thunder!"

"Father—it is father!" gasped Little Puss, almost dropping the weapon which an instant later would have been hurling its deadly contents up the slope toward the little curl of blue smoke which her keen gaze had detected.

From the opposite slope—the one from whence that treacherous volley had been sent at the helpless miners—came wild oaths and yells of mingling alarm and rage as a leaden hail came whistling over the narrow valley, seeming to confirm the impression made by that loud and hearty voice. It seemed as though at least half a dozen rifles were vomiting forth their contents!

And Little Puss, turning her weapon in the same direction, worked trigger and lever as swiftly as the most expert, though she could only guess at the spot where the road-agents were hiding or fleeing.

She could hear them, and knew that they were in hasty flight after those first few moments of surprise, but a dip in the slope hid them from her view, whether mounted or on foot.

"Lively, lads, an' we've got 'em!" shouted the as yet unseen marksman on the eastern slope, punctuating his words with rifle-shots. "Stop 'em ef they try to break through thar, Jim! Save enough on 'em fer a hangin'-bee, anyhow!"

Despite his experience in wild life Booth Barrett seemed wholly at a loss what to do or how to act in this peculiar emergency. Little Puss had rudely spurned him when he would have checked her impulsive rush. And his wild gaze shifted quickly from slope to slope, from the

level ground where the hampered miners lay, to the face of the maiden whom he loved: a face now almost glorious in its wild beauty!

From the eastern slope came a low, mellow laugh as the rapid firing ceased, and a moment later a tall, gaunt figure stepped into view. One hand grasped the Winchester which had worked so industriously, the other an old felt hat, leaving the long, grizzled locks of hair to be tossed back by the freshening evening breeze.

"I reckon that'll do, gal!" he cried, as he began descending the hill, still laughing, though his gaze was now turned in the direction of the fallen miners. "I don't think a gatling gun could reach them imps by this time! The way they *did* git up an' git! Ef each critter hed jumped astraddle of one o' your bullets fer a ride he couldn't 'a' gone much faster!"

He paused abruptly, dropping down behind a handy rock as a rifle exploded and sent its lead to scatter the gravel behind him.

"Back in the cabin gal!" he cried, sharply, only the black muzzle of his replenished weapon to be seen as he maneuvered for a shot. "I'm all right fer—"

His weapon spoke sharply, and blending with the report came a wild and choking shriek from the opposite slope.

Then Booth Barrett seemed to wake up to a full sense of the situation, and catching Puss up in his arms, he bore her into the stone cabin, paying no attention to her struggles and remonstrances.

Posey Curtis peered out from his cover, a hard, grim smile on his weather-beaten features.

"I see 'em runnin' like thar shirts was afire!" he muttered, as his eyes sought vainly for another animate target. "I could 'a' tuck oath they was all gone, too bad skeered to tell one man from a hull rijiment. One must 'a' stopped, whether he wanted to or not, fer thar he lays now, past kickin' or shootin' from this time on! He don't bother me; it's the chaine whether or no they ain't more on 'em layin' low fer a pot-shot at my bigness!"

If this troubled him, Posey Curtis did not show it save in cautious movements. Certainly it did not render his iron nerves unsteady or chase the grim, hard smile from his face as he slowly, deftly stole from rock to bush, from bush to rock, pausing at each fresh covert to scan the opposite slope, to unmask any hidden foe before a snap-shot could again endanger his life.

"I reckon they wasn't but the one," he muttered, after several minutes of this maneuvering without making any discovery. "Reckon that fool critter was one I drapped when I let off the old battery at fu'st. Crippled him, mebbe. Rest too mighty skeered fer to stop an' pick him up to help 'em run away!"

Although almost wholly satisfied with this explanation, Posey Curtis was too old and experienced a fighter to take anything for granted when the odds were so heavily in favor of the road-agents, and though he quickened his progress down the slope toward the miners, who still lay in a heap on the level, motionless as though that treacherous volley 'ad instantly slain them all, he kept well covered, with his rifle ready for a snap-shot on the instant.

At the base of the slope he paused for a brief space, keenly scrutinizing the point at and around the fallen road-agent. He would have no further cover in reaching the miners. To cut their bonds, he must fully expose himself, and should any of the road-agents still be in ambush, they could readily pick him off with scarcely any risk to themselves.

"I say, you critters layin' out thar!" Posey Curtis uttered, in tones too low to reach across the valley and up the other slope, "you ain't all croaked, he ye?"

There came no answer in words, but Posey saw a head turn slightly and caught sight of a pair of eyes, very wide open indeed! They were the eyes of Mark Toogood, and Posey Curtis gave a glad grunt as he recognized them.

"Good enough so fur!" he uttered, with another glance up the slope where the dead man lay. "I reckon the imps is cleaner out fer good. Anyway, I'm goin' to resk it!"

With a rapid series of leaps and erratic bounds he gained the spot where the four helpless miners were lying, dropping quickly behind them, his rifle at his shoulder and ready for a shot as his blazing eyes scanned the dangerous slope beyond. But there came no shot to tell of an ambush, no sound to tell that his daring movements were being watched with unfriendly eyes. And a low, relieved laugh parted his thin lips.

"Gone to look fer last winter's snows, I reckon. The Old Boy go with 'em fer luck, say I!"

He drew a knife and deftly cut the rope that hampered the miners, guided more by the sense of touch than of sight, for his eyes were even yet on the lookout for danger. And as he worked, he muttered:

"I know by the look ye give me that *you're* all right, Mark, an' I hope all the rest kin say the same, though when them dirty whelps cut loose an' you drapped in a heap, I wouldn't 'a' giv' a pewter dollar fer all the breath that was left into ye!"

"I'm alive—all right," gasped Mark Toogood, as he spat out the suffocating gag.

"Mighty glad to hear ye say so, too!" chuckled Posey Curtis, still with his eyes roving over the rocks beyond, still with his sinewy right hand gripping his faithful Winchester, ready to lift and discharge it on a moment's warning.

"Them's *your* arms, I take it?"

"Yes—slash 'em loose!" muttered Toogood, in a clearer voice. "Never mind ef you do fetch the blood! Cut 'em loose, an' let me git a whack at the whelps!"

"I reckon they're done whacked out, pard," laughed Posey, plying his knife solely by the sense of touch. "I raaly think they've got out o' your jurisdiction, onless they broke thar necks in the hurry they was in the last glimp' I ketched of 'em. You kin use your paws?"

"Yes."

"Grip my butcher, then, an' I'll slide back to kiver. Wait onel I whistle, then cut the rest loose. They won't nobody take a pot-shot at the heap o' ye while I'm watchin', I'll go bail!"

With an agility remarkable in one of his years, Posey Curtis turned and bounded back to the nearest cover, dropping down behind it, rifle in readiness for use at the first glimpse of a foe. He whistled, and Mark Toogood rapidly plied the knife left with him, muttering:

"How is it, pards? You ain't all dead, I know, but somebody was hit mighty hard, from the way I was pulled down. Not *you*, Dingle?"

"Hev I got any head left onto me, Mark?"

faintly asked the man who had been bound to him. "Did the hull airth fly up an' knock me west-end-an'-crooked? Or *what*?"

"Your tongue's left, anyway, Dingle," grimly retorted Toogood, in no mood just then for idle chatter.

As rapidly as possible he set Dan Orvis and mate free, then turned toward Posey Curtis, saying:

"You're running this outfit, Posey; what comes next?"

"All right with the rest of 'em? That's hearty!" with an honest fervor, as the response came simultaneously from the trio.

And this was true, despite that treacherous volley: for that it was designed to forever put the avengers off the trail, was clear enough from the wound received by Tom Dingle, one bullet tearing along his skull, felling him as though his brain was pierced, his fall had drawn the others with him, and as their sole hope they lay still as they fell, lest other and more sure shots come to complete the dastardly job.

"Up an' break fer cover, then. You come here, Mark. I'll leave a pistol fer you, an' another one behind the next rock I strike. Let one feller foller me thar, an' with three good men armed I reckon we'll be all hunky!"

"Then the imps is still layin' low?" growled Mark Toogood, his eyes fairly blazing with a thirst for revenge. "I'd give my life fer a show to git even!"

Quickly the programme as outlined by Posey Curtis was carried out, and that without a single sign of danger or interruption. The three men were armed, and at a convenient covert they all came together.

"I reckon the imps is gone, sure enough!" chuckled Posey Curtis, highly elated at accomplishing his purpose so easily. "But when they git time to count noses, an' find they've left anyway one o' thar pards ahind 'em, they'll be mighty apt fer to come back a-tearin' fer wool!"

"I hope so!" grated Mark Toogood, his eyes ablaze.

"So don't I, too!" with a quick glance toward the stone cabin, and a thought of his daughter. "The furdur they run an' the longer they stay, the better I'll think of 'em. But ef they be comin', we'd better git as good ready as we kin. Come up to the cabin, an' I'll fit ye out with weepens the best I kin. Of course they tuck your tools?"

As the answer was self-evident, Posey did not pause to receive it in words, but turned toward the cabin at once. He kept up his cautious movements, using the best cover available, his rifle ever in readiness for use. Mark Toogood, too angry for such prudence, soon rose erect and strode openly up the slope to the door, where he was welcomed by Puss.

"You don't hold a grudge against me, Mark?" she asked, blushing painfully, her tones unsteady, her black eyes dimmed with tears.

"Not ag'in' you, Pritty Puss—not ag'in' you," the burly miner muttered, his voice anything but hearty as he uttered the words. "You done what you thought was right, I don't doubt."

There was a hard, almost ugly expression on the face of Posey Curtis as he came up, pushing past Mark Toogood and confronting Booth Barrett, who stood near the rear window, his own face pale and hard-set.

"It is you, then, Lucky Barrett?" coldly demanded the owner of the lone cabin. "I wasn't dead sure when I fu'st see you from over yender."

"Father," interposed Little Puss, clasping the sinewy arm with both her hands and gazing into his hard face with tear-dimmed eyes. "You know Mr. Barrett? Only for him—only for his

coming, I doubt if you would ever have seen your girl alive again!"

In her anxiety to keep peace Little Puss did not stop to pick and choose her words, and naturally enough they startled Posey.

"What all's b'in goin' on, anyway? Speak out plain, Puss!" he uttered, glancing swiftly from her now flushed face to that of Booth Barrett. "I didn't see but the last eend of it. I ketched the sound o' shootin' over this way, an' made a break as fast as my legs could kiver the ground. Only fer that, mebbe I wouldn't 'a' wasted nigh so much lead with so little meat to show fer it! But go on—out with it, gal!"

Ordinarily Little Puss had a fluent tongue, but just now she was painfully agitated, and seeing this, Booth Barrett came to the rescue.

"Like you, Mr. Curtis, my notice was attracted by shots from here, and in hopes of proving of service, I hastened up. I found Miss Curtis standing off those four men at the muzzle of her rifle. I didn't stop to ask what the trouble was about, but offered her my assistance, just as any gentleman would have done."

"It was a poor, fainting wretch who begged me to save his life, father!" impulsively broke in Little Puss. "He staggered into the house and fell to the floor, almost dead with fatigue and terror. What could I do, when he begged for mercy, in the name of heaven? I tried to save his life, but I would have failed, only for—only for Mr. Barrett's coming."

"We didn't value him the snap of a finger," coldly put in Mark Toogood. "Ef you hed b'in like him, or ef he'd b'in a dozen, all men, like us, we'd 'a' run in an' finished Red Bergum or got wiped out in the tryin'. I ain't sayin' nothin' ag'in' you, Lucky Barrett," with a grim frown toward that personage. "You done jest what any white man would 'a' done with the same chaine, that wasn't knowin' to all Red Bergum hed carved out in red letters. But it was Pritty Puss that stood us off, not you!"

From speaker to speaker Posey Curtis turned, listening in grim silence to what each had to offer. When Mark Toogood ceased speaking, he turned to Barrett once more, his voice cold and hard:

"Ef you've done anythin' my little gal thinks wu'th thanks, play I've thanked you double over, Lucky Barrett."

"I want no thanks. I only—"

"I ain't crowdin' 'em onto ye, Lucky Barrett," in the same cold, passionless, but inexorable tones. "Ef you won't take 'em, let 'em go. An' mebbe you'll be good enough to go with 'em? You come through the door; I reckon you kin manidge to git out the same way."

"Father!" cried Little Puss, her flushed face turning pale as that of a corpse. "Father—for my sake!"

Posey Curtis passed one arm around her trembling figure, drawing her close to the side of his person furthest from Booth Barrett, his other hand pointing to the open door.

"I will go, since you order me, and since this is your house," returned the young man, his face pale and hard-set. "But first—will you grant me a brief interview on important business?"

"These men are my friends, an' I've got nothin' to say or listen to that I'm ashamed fer them to hear. Ef *you* hev, then I don't want to waste good time a-listenin' to it," coldly retorted Posey.

"Go, Booth—obey, for *my* sake!" faltered Little Puss, clinging with trembling arms to her stalwart father, as though fearing his hot temper would get the upper hand of his self-control.

"You know how sacred are your wishes in my sight, Puss," the young man uttered, his voice for the first time showing signs of unsteadiness. "You know that I would walk through death itself to give you the slightest degree of pleasure—but I can't go away now without saying what is on my lips—without speaking before these men the words I wished to speak to your father alone!"

"Ef you hain't lost your nickname o' Lucky, I reckon you'd better pull out in a hurry, boy!" muttered Posey Curtis, the big veins starting out on throat and temples, his face slowly flushing, his eyes seeming to retreat further into his head.

"When I've said my say, not before, Mr. Curtis," responded Barrett, his voice steady, but his face beginning to betray the strong emotions which lay beneath.

Without a word Posey Curtis turned and freeing his arm of that clinging clasp, he placed Little Puss, panting, sobbing, half-distracted, into the hands of Mark Toogood.

"Look after the gal a minnit, will you, pard?" he said, with ominous coldness, then turning back to Booth Barrett, who faced him firmly.

"Say your say, an' put it as short as you know how, young man. But think afore you speak. I don't want to hurt ye onless I've got to."

Barrett hesitated, but it was only for a single breath. He felt that he was cutting his own throat, but after what had passed he could not draw back, even with that great loss staring him full in the face.

"You know what I have to say, but I'll put

it in words so plain that even your prejudice can't distort it," he said, keeping his voice well under control, though the struggle to do so was visible enough.

"Out with it, sence I've got to listen. Out with it—an' short!"

"I love your daughter. I wish to make her my wife. I ask you to give your consent to our marriage."

Coldly, tersely, Booth Barrett uttered these words. Then, with arms folded tightly over his chest, he waited for his answer.

It came right speedily, but not in words. Posey Curtis, a cold, grim smile on his weather-beaten face, took one step forward and his sinewy hands closed upon the young man's shoulders with a vise-like grip. He stared intently into those bold brown eyes for an instant, then flung back his head with a toss that sent the iron-gray hair flying over his shoulders. His right hand released its grip, pointing with steady finger to the open door. His left hand, seemingly taking the power of its mate as well, forced Booth Barrett across the floor and outdoors.

Mark Toogood made a hasty gesture which Dan Orvis and another readily interpreted. They acted promptly, following the pair outside, weapons in hand, ready to use them on the instant should Booth Barrett turn upon his stern captor.

But there was no occasion for their interference. Deep as must have been his mortification, bitter as must have been his disappointment, Booth Barrett made no resistance whatever as Posey Curtis forced rather than bore him company down the slope before the stone cabin.

Pausing when fairly beyond earshot of those above, Posey Curtis released the young man, gazing sternly into his pale, hard-set face, his tones full of suppressed dislike and bitterness:

"You know the way you come, Lucky Barrett. That's the trail to town. Take it, and don't you come on this claim ag'in, if you know what is good medicine."

"You talk as though I had committed an unpardonable crime."

"Ef you hain't, it comes too mighty nigh it to be funny. It's a insult fer any sech critter as you to speak o' love in the same breath with an honest girl. It's a insult I've let go this time, fer her sake, sence she thinks you've done her a service. But ef you want to wear gray hairs, don't you repeat it. Don't you ever come around this claim ag'in until I send fer ye. Don't you let me know of your ever takin' the name o' my little gal on your lips thar in town, 'mong your feller-hawks. Ef I do—I'm Posey Curtis!"

Booth Barrett listened coldly until the father ceased speaking. There was a ghost of a smile on his lips, yet too plain for his drooping mustache to entirely conceal from the keen eyes of the other. It was like flaunting the scarlet rag in the face of an angry bull, though this heat of Posey Curtis's was a white one.

"You laugh, do ye?" he said, his voice still colder, still harder than before. "You think your nickname 'll stick by ye ag'in? Posey Curtis? You think you kin wring in some o' your dirty tricks, jest as you do when you set out to skin a poor foor from top to toe with your marked keerds an' your other devil's 'ventions?"

A flush came into the face of the lover at these words, and his tones were as hot as they were swift:

"The man who accuses me of foul play is a liar!"

"I say you hev played foul more times then you kin count in a week!" sharply retorted the old man, his eyes all aglow.

"Then you—are Miss Curtis's father," bowed Booth Barrett, with a low laugh. "That gives you more license than I will grant to any other man on the face of the footstool!"

"An' gives you a chance to crawl out of a mighty awkward box!" contemptuously laughed Posey, with a toss of his leonine head. "Let it go at that. I don't want your blood on my hands. Ef you don't want it thar, the sooner you start fer town, the better fer us both."

"All right. I'll go. But one parting word," and Booth Barrett gazed firmly, defiantly into those black eyes. "Unless you kill the love which Puss bears for me, I'll win and wear her yet."

"Go, you dirty whelp!" grated Curtis, drawing a revolver and covering the bold speaker. "Git! or I'll blow your black heart out!"

"Think you can hit the back of an empty-handed man?" laughed the other, turning to move slowly away in the direction of town. "If so, cut loose."

And without once glancing over his shoulder, he strode away.

CHAPTER XI.

POSEY PREACHES A SERMON.

FOR the space of a single breath Booth Barrett's life hung by a thread frail as ever spider spun. A revolver covered him, a finger was pressing the trigger, and there was death in those black eyes. Had he spoken another word. Had he made another irritating gesture. Had

he afforded even the faintest shadow of an excuse, Posey Curtis would have wiped out his hatred and his fears on his daughter's account at one and the same time.

But steadily on walked the gambler from Posey's Pocket, turning neither to the right nor the left. Without slackening or hurrying his measured footsteps. Without a backward glance. Pacing on as coolly and as deliberately as though enmity and he had naught in common.

It was a superb exhibition of nerve, and after that first brief spasm of rage, Posey Curtis was forced to admit as much. Slowly, deliberately, his pistol was lowered, and almost despite himself the words rose in his throat:

"I cain't shoot him like I would a dog! I'd ought to, but I cain't!"

Then, as though fearing to trust himself further, he turned on his heel and slowly moved back to the little stone cabin.

As Posey reached the door Mark Toogood released Little Puss, whom he had held until now, sobbing, trembling, fearing the worst. She cast one glance into the cold, hard-set face of her father as he entered the room, then sprung to the open door.

A gasp of intense relief broke from her lungs as she caught sight of Booth Barrett passing down the valley. Her worst, most acute fears were banished by that sight, and with bowed head, she hurried into her room, closing the door behind her.

As she passed from view, Mark Toogood suddenly resumed his former hard, vengeful mood, speaking hurriedly:

"You said somethin' 'bout lendin' us tools, Posey, so—"

"I'll fit ye out the best I know, though I don't reckon thar's any great danger o' them imps comin' back this way fer a bit. Ef they was comin' I'd 'a' hearn from 'em when I was out jest now."

Although Red Bergum had failed in his search for fire-arms while pent up in the stone cabin, fire-arms there were close at hand. Posey lifted one of the broad puncheons which formed the floor, revealing a shallow, dry, box-like arrangement in one corner of the room. From this he took a couple of Winchester rifles and a brace of revolvers, all in prime order and each provided with a sufficiency of fixed ammunition.

"You go mighty well heeled, Posey!" muttered Toogood, as he took one of the rifles and satisfied himself it was in good working order.

"I've got to," was the short, dry response, as Curtis closed the hiding-place and stood erect. "It wasn't always as smooth sailin' in these diggings as it is now, an' more'n once I've hed time to thank the lucky stars that made me lay in a stock o' tools like them. Why—"

"Nother time, Posey!" muttered Toogood, turning and striding to the doorway. "Business fu'st. Come on, pards. Ef they's any o' them infarnal black-faces within reach I want to git a grip onto 'em!"

Without pausing for a response, Mark Toogood sprung outside, facing the slope from whence that dastardly volley was discharged. But not a sound to betray the presence of an enemy accompanied this movement. Only the grimly silent shape lying at the base of a blood-sprinkled boulder bore evidence that enemies had ever been near.

"I don't say I'm glad I drapped the critter," muttered Posey Curtis, as he paused beside the fallen road-agent, from whose pain-contorted face Mark Toogood hastily stripped the sable mask. "But I ain't cryin' any tears over it, nuther! He tuck his life in his own hands, an' he was tryin' his level best fer to butcher you critters. I didn't shoot at him in peticklar, as I knows on. I'd run a long stretch at the top notch, an' my narves wasn't quite as stiddy as they mought 'a' b'in, mebbe. I jest p'inted this way, an' let blizzer, countin' on gin'ral results, like!"

"I'm only wishin' you'd drapped more!" growled Toogood, rising from his examination with a disappointed scowl. "I don't know the cur. I cain't git any clew to the rest o' the gang by his face."

One by one his mates declared the same. The road-agent was a stranger to all.

With weapons ready for an emergency, though even the most sanguine was about convinced that their search was useless before it fairly opened, the slope was covered by the miners and their ally. Here and there their keen eyes noted the bluish splash of bullets on rock or boulder, and an occasional drop of blood told them that every bit of lead had not been spent on insensate objects.

"You've marked one or two o' the critters, four-legged or two!" grimly chuckled Mark Toogood.

"Mighty queer they ain't more of 'em layin' 'round loose!" muttered Dan Orvis, showing his yellow teeth after an ugly fashion. "A brag shot couldn't well 'a' missed more ef he'd tried his level best!"

Posey Curtis glanced quickly into that thin, foxy face.

"Ef I wanted to brag, stranger, mebbe I'd talk more o' how that same wild shootin' fetch-

ed you safe out of a mighty ugly box! But let it go at that. I ain't in the man-killin' business fer a livin'."

"They've skun out fer keeps, I reckon!" reluctantly admitted Mark Toogood, staring moodily at the deep scars left behind by iron-shod hoofs in hasty flight down the second slope. "We cain't ketch 'em on foot, with the long start they've got. An' then thar's the boys—it won't do to leave 'em alone any longer."

Like one afraid to trust himself so near temptation, Mark Toogood turned abruptly from the fresh trail, striding down to the lone cabin.

Posey Curtis bustled around, collecting such articles as past experience told him would prove valuable in such an emergency: food and drink, soft cloths and bandages.

"I'd like mighty well to go with ye, lads, to lend a helpin' hand, but you kin see how I'm fixed," the veteran said, earnestly, while thus charitably engaged. "I changed my voice as good as I knowed how, but I reckon them black-faced imps hes a pritty good idee who done all that shootin', now they've hed time to think it over an' made out that they ain't nobody chasin' of 'em. It won't make 'em none the milder-minded to think they skittered off in sech a hurry afore only a old man an' his little gal! An' ef they should git hot enough to come back fer to git even—don't ye see? I cain't run the resk o' leavin' my little gal all by herself."

"We don't ax it, Posey," returned Toogood, who appeared to be the only one of the quartette who intimately knew the veteran. "Ef we was takin' the trail o' them critters, it mought be different. An' so would your answer be, I reckon!"

"I ain't so mighty sure 'bout that, nuther," slowly uttered Posey Curtis, shaking his head, a grave look filling his eyes. "My tastes nur gifts don't drift that way Mark."

"But they're thieves an' bloody killers! They're pards o' Red Bergum, an' you know what all he's done!" hotly cried Toogood.

"I know. I wouldn't lift a finger to save the dog, ef his neck was in a loop an' that liftin' could save his wuthless life. But huntin' down a lot o' critters a body don't know from a hole in the ground! That ain't jest the same, to my notion!"

They're tarred with the same stick. They tuck Red Bergum out of the noose. They claimed him as thar pard. They roped us like sheep-killin' curs, an' then tried to slaughter us. Fer all them they've got to pay—an' pay in red notes, too!"

Mebbe I'd feel the same way ef I was in your place, but—"

"Fu'st, we've got to look to our mates Red Bergum: dropped, or sech of 'em as is still livin'. Then 'll raise a gang big enough to wipe the gang off o' the face o' the airth! We'll come back her to take thar trail, an' ef you're a man—ef you're the man I've tuck you fer all these years, Posey—you'll take the trail with us, fer by that time I don't know a pa'r o' human eyes I'd rather trust then yours, the trail 'll be so mighty cold! You'll go, Posey?"

Gravey Curtis listened. Gravey he shook his head as Mark Toogood ceased speaking, awaiting his decision with keen interest.

"I don't reckon I will, pard. It ain't my line. Ef I'm crowded, I'll fight the best I know how, but I cain't play the bloodhound!"

"Say the why, an' done with it!" snarled Dan Orvis, showing his teeth viciously. "I've hearn folks say that you wasn't livin' out here so lonely all fer nothin'! I've hearn 'em hint you was playin' in with the gang—an' now I knows it!"

Stern and white-faced, Posey Curtis listened to the venomous little rascal, saying not a word, making not a move until he finished. Then he caught Dan Orvis by the shoulders, twisting his feet from the floor, bearing him to the door, through which he tossed him like a bundle of straw, his voice harsh and strained as he cried:

"Git up, you foul-mouthed whelp! Git up an' say them words over ag'in to my face! Bah!" with a scornful laugh as Orvis scrambled to his feet, one hand brushing the dirt from his eyes, the other feeling for the heavy revolver hanging at his hip. "That's my gun you've got, but you don't dare to use it on a man! See! I'm a big mark. I won't lift a finger to hender ye. I won't tetch a gun nor knife. But, all the same, you're too big a cur to shoot or strike!"

"Drop it, Dan!" sternly cried Toogood, the muzzle of his rifle slipping under the arm of the veteran and staring the infuriated miner full in the face. "Drop it, or I'll drop you!"

"Keep your shirt on, pard," icily retorted the little desperado, his rat eyes glittering venomously, but making no effort to accept that contemptuous dare. "I won't shoot the critter with his own gun. When I git one o' my own ag'in, mebbe I'll come back an' ax to git even fer the toss he lent me."

He drew the loaded pistol from his belt, tossing it at the feet of Posey Curtis, then wheeled and strode rapidly down the slope.

"I'm mighty sorry fer this, Posey," gravely muttered Toogood.

"It wasn't no fault o' yours, pard," promptly

replied Curtis, with all traces of anger vanishing like frost before the warm sun.

"But it cuts, all the same! One o' my pards, insultin' you under your own roof-tree—an' that jest after your savin' his life."

"I hed to take the good with the bad, Mark," laughed Posey, genially. "I couldn't save you an' leave him, even ef I'd knowed the sort o' medicine he was. Let it go. It'll be all the same a hundred years from now."

"An' you won't think better of it? You won't go with us when we take the trail?" slowly asked Toogood.

"Not unless I git a change o' heart afore then, mate," with a low, mellow laugh that strangely softened the hard, weather-beaten face. "I hate to refuse a old pard like you, but I'd be lyin' ef I said anythin' else. I ain't a man-hunter. I can't fight unless it's crowded onto me, or unless I see my little gal in danger. Then the red devil comes into me, an' I let go all holts—because I hev to! I can't tell jest how it comes, or why it is, but that's the nighest. I'm a devil, then! But as long as I'm a man, I'll never go blood-huntin', pard or no pard."

"Ef you won't, you won't, an' that settles it, Posey, though your notions is too mighty way-up fer me to understand. I'll see you git back your tools in good time, pard. Come on, lads! We've burnt too much daylight a'ready."

Posey Curtis bore the three men company to the foot of the slope, parting from them there with renewed good wishes. He stood watching them as they passed down the valley through the gathering gloom, until the shadows swallowed them up. He still hesitated, though he turned his face toward the cabin where Little Puss was waiting.

His face was very grave, very sober as he at length slowly made his way up the incline and entered the house. He paused, gazing at the closed door, beyond which he knew his idolized child was hidden, sorrowing, perchance bitterly if silently upbraiding him for his cruelty.

"As ef it didn't come nigh as hard on me as it kin on her!" he muttered below his breath. "Harder! Fer it's only a passin' notion to her—one that she'll outgrow in a week, at funderst!"

His lips shaped the words, but his heart and brain repudiated them. He felt that Little Puss was of far different metal, and his next words came far closer to the mark.

"I know'd the time'd come when she'd give her heart away, but I wouldn't see it afore I hed to! It'd be bitter luck enough—be hard enough to let her go to the whitest man on a'irth! But to hev her take a fancy fer a critter like Lucky Barrett! That's the wu'st of all! An' I'm sore afraid it'll prove her death-blow, too. I'm sore afraid!"

He started as the chamber door swung open with a tiny creaking sound, and his face turned pale as chalk as he saw Little Puss standing before him, her face tear-stained, her eyes dim, her red lips quivering pitifully as she gazed silently, beseechingly into his face.

"Father—tell me what you said to—to him, down yonder?" she murmured, brokenly. "I hope—father, I love him so dearly!"

She sprang into his arms as they opened, her little head nestling in his broad bosom. She was sobbing, but they were not altogether born of grief. She was young. He loved her so passionately. Surely she need not wholly despair of winning him over? And Booth was so good, so true, so brave and all that was adorable! Even her father could not long keep from loving him.

Silently Posey moved to the door, sitting down on the threshold, a rifle close to his hand, holding his daughter upon his lap, just as he had for years and years, 'way back to the time when her mother was removed from them by cruel death. Silently he waited, his dark eyes looking at the stars as they came out one by one, twinkling brightly despite the rising of the nearly full moon. Softly one hand stroked the little curly head lying over his heart. Patiently he waited until the low sobbing died away, until Little Puss gave a faint sigh of returning content.

"Father," she murmured, her tones yet a little unsteady, but so full of love, mingled with a quaint, pathetic, coaxing coo that had never before failed her. "Father, you are so nice when you are real good!"

"I hope ye'll alays think so, Kitty-puss," he muttered, sadly.

"I will, if—"

"I knowed it, Puss," he said, as she paused, glancing shyly up into his weather-beaten face. "I knowed that'd come next. As long's I let you hev your own way in everythin', I'm jest ole persimmons!"

"Why not?" with a little laugh that was intended to have all her wonted playful audacity, but which was a lamentable failure. "Who else have you to spoil, daddy?"

"No one, Puss; the good Lord grant I don't spoil you too much."

"Am I so easily spoilt, then?" with a shower of kisses, as her warm palms clasped each cheek, holding his head motionless.

"Puss, how many times has Lucky Barrett b'in here when I've b'in gone?" he suddenly demanded, his tones growing harsh as he strug-

gled to nerve himself for what he felt must prove a painful interview.

"How many times?" murmured Puss, shrinking as far away as his embracing arm would permit, her face turning until it was hidden from his steady gaze.

"Puss—child!" he muttered, with an awful fear tugging at his heart-strings, making his voice sound strained and unnatural. "You ain't ashamed to look me in the face? You ain't afeard to answer me?"

Instantly her face was turned toward him, her eyes glowing vividly and her face flushing warmly. But Posey Curtis gave a long breath as he knew that flush was not one born of shame.

"Father, do you know how strange your words sound, speaking to me, your daughter?" Little Puss slowly uttered.

"I didn't mean 'em that way, Kitty-puss," meekly.

"I am not ashamed to answer any question you see fit to ask, daddy—why should I be?"

"But you don't answer it, child! How often has that feller bin here to see you? How comes it that he dared to ax me ef he might marry my gal—you, Kitty-puss?" with a sniff of indignation.

"Am I so awful ugly and mean and no-count, daddy, that no one can fall in—in love with me?" softly murmured Little Puss, hiding her face again.

There was a brief silence, during which Posey Curtis stared at the twinkling stars more intently than ever. During which he kept swallowing something that would keep rising in his throat. During which Little Puss lay on his arm, trembling, holding her breath, waiting for the answer which she had so boldly dared.

With a low sigh Posey turned his gaze from the bright stars to the gloomy shadows in the valley below. Somehow they seemed far the most appropriate, just now!

"Puss, I'm goin' to talk to ye ca'mly an' soberly, an' I want you to listen to me, as a good gal should listen to the words of a father who loves her heap more than all the rest o' the world put together. Say you'll do it, little gal!"

"Yes—if you don't say too many hard things about— Oh, Daddy! he is so very, very dear to me!" with a sobbing cry.

"That's a harder thing than I ever expected to hear come from your lips, Puss," sadly muttered Posey. "I'd almost rather hear you say you was sick unto death!"

"I love him! I love him!"

Passionately she uttered these words. A dark frown came over the face of the old man, and a reddish light began to glow in his eyes. It was worse even than his fears had painted, but he felt that he had gone too far to pause now. The truth must be told, and the scales torn from the poor child's eyes. Bitter the remedy might be, but in the end she would thank him for his cruel kindness.

"Listen to me, Puss," he said, clasping her closer to his breast, rocking his body slightly as one might seek to soothe a fretful child. "I've got a little story to tell ye that— No I won't! You'd see through it in a minnit, an' the plain truth is heap the best."

"That young feller ain't no fit comp'ny fer you. Ef you knowed him as I know him, you'd turn sick at the very sight o' him!"

Little Puss lifted her head until their eyes met despite his effort to hold her close. Her voice was strained as she asked:

"You are speaking of Booth Barrett, father?"

"That same critter, Puss!"

"Then one word first," with almost desperate calmness. "I love that man as mother must have loved you before you married her. Life without him seems to me worse than death! I love him! Now, go on."

"I'm glad they ain't nobody nigh to hear you speak so, Puss, 'cept your old daddy—an' your mother, up yonder!" with a glance toward the twinkling stars. "It's bitter enough as it is, but it'd be heap wuss to hev it go out an' be laughed an' sneered at in town that Lucky Barrett has made a fool of Posey Curtis's gal!"

"Wait a bit, Puss," as the maiden started back with a low cry that was almost as much indignation as grief. "I'm talkin' now. When I git through you kin say what you feel like sayin'."

"I know more about this feller than you kin know, even though you hev tuck a notion that you love him so mighty dearly. I know him from A to Ampersand, an' I'm goin' to make you know him jest as well afore I let up. It may cut deep, but so it leaves a spark o' life behind, that will be better then to let you run to ruin like you be now!"

"Lucky Barrett they call him down in town. Why? Because he wins twenty games o' keards whar he loses one. Because he kin win or lose jest as he wants, or jest 'cordin' he thinks it'll be money in his pocket when the game breaks up. Because they hain't nobody bin sharp enough yit to ketch him playin' foul, though it's either that or he's sold his soul to the Old Boy—no honest man ever stuck sech a long an' stiddy run o' good luck!"

"That's bad enough, but thar's wuss to come. A gambler mought be a honest man, though it'd be a powerful tight squeeze, I reckon! Booth Barrett is a drunkard. One o' the wu'st sort, too! One o' the kind that soaks himself like a sponge, day in an' day out. One that gits chuck-full every day o' his life, yit one who never shows that he's drunk in his talk or his looks or his walk. One that nothin' kin reform. One that I'd rather see you dead an' buried then to be tied to!"

"Is this all you have to bring against Mr. Barrett?" asked Little Puss, her tones ominously steady, her eyes glowing vividly, her face pale and hard-set.

"That's all I kin swear to, but thar's whispers that'll soon grow into open talk, mixin' him up with the gang that's b'in playin' road-agent fer the last six months an' over."

"The same gang that passed by here to-day, of course!" with a short, hard laugh. "The same gang that Booth Barrett faced with a rifle and forced to release the men they were getting ready to hang without judge or jury—the men you call your friends, father!"

"The same outfit, no doubt," quietly.

"Yet Booth Barrett swore to shoot them down like dogs if they persisted in carrying out their threats! Is that like being one of their number?"

"'Cordin' as ye look at it, child," gravely.

"Would sech a des'prit gang loose thar grip at one man's say-so, unless they felt bound to mind what he told 'em?"

"You hate him so much that you can see nothing but evil in all he does or says!" passionately cried the girl, freeing herself and standing erect in the bright moonlight.

"And you, my poor child?" muttered Posey Curtis, his words hardly intelligible, so powerful was his emotion.

"I love him! I love him, and I am proud to say so!" Little Puss exclaimed, impetuously. "I love him, even as he loves me, with a love that death alone can destroy!"

Posey Curtis also rose to his feet, his face showing signs of growing passion, though he strove hard to make his tones calm and steady.

"You think so now, Puss; but in the mornin'—"

"Then as now! The same at the end of a year—a dozen years!"

"You don't mean it, Puss. You're just tryin' to fool me!"

"Father," her voice suddenly growing calmer, her face paling but seeming all the more resolute for that, as she touched his arm with one hand, the other lifted above her head. "I call on heaven to witness my words. I believe Booth Barrett to be true and honest as the broad day. I love him, and he loves me. That love will never die, save with death."

"Death it'll be, then, ef ever I ketch that critter sneakin' 'round this place ag'in!" cried Posey Curtis, losing all control of his hot passions, and speaking rapidly, viciously. "You take an oath, an' I'll take another! As God hears me, I'll never let you marry that man while the breath o' life is in my body! I'll shoot him down like a prowlin' wolf ef I ever ketch him on this claim! An' ef you think to run away with him, I'll—"

"Stop, father!" cried Puss, her lips quivering, her proud attitude changing for one of pained shrinking from those cruel words. "I beg of you, don't! Don't kill me by such bitter insults as—"

"Little Puss!" muttered Posey, clasping her in his arms, pressing her to his heaving bosom, touching her brow with his quivering lips.

"Say that you didn't mean it, father!" panted the maiden. "Say that you didn't mean—didn't think I'd ever run away!"

"I hardly know what I *did* say, little gal," with a choking laugh, as he smoothed her curly locks. "What I *meant* to say was I'd rather see you dead an' in your coffin, then to hev you desert your pore old pap fer sech trash as Lucky Barrett! That I'd kill him fu'st!"

"Father, dearly as I love Booth, I'll never marry him without your consent. But that is all I can promise. I *do* love him. I know he loves me. I feel that you wrong him in callin' him—such dreadful names!"

"Ef I prove 'em all to you, little gal? You'll fergit him then?" eagerly muttered Posey Curtis, gazing wistfully into her dark eyes.

"You never will prove them, father!"

"But ef I do! Ef I do prove 'em all?" he persisted.

"Then— I believe it would kill me!" impetuously cried Little Puss, shivering, sobbing on his troubled breast.

CHAPTER XII.

THE BANK ROBBERY, AS REPORTED.

COOL and careless though he seemed on the surface, Felix Bland was hardly a man to be taken completely by surprise, no matter what the circumstances might be. The moment he entered the chamber, his keen eyes, among other points, noted the closed door at the head of the bed, and almost directly behind Darius Aymer as he sat at the little table.

Thus it was that The Man of Silk caught the

first motion of the door, and swiftly as it was flung open to reveal Adine Aymer, pistols in hand, his motions were still more rapid. His weapon (or the weapon so deftly wrested from the old man's hand) covered the opening and was in readiness for business before Adine could catch a glimpse of him.

She must have seen this, but she showed no signs of fear or discomfiture. Perhaps she could not fully realize the peril she was running. Perhaps she felt secure in her sex. Be that as it may, she uttered that mocking speech with all the confidence of one who holds the key of the situation entirely in her hands.

For a single breath The Man of Silk gazed at the dainty little woman—now clad in a light, soft, clinging fabric, her blonde hair falling loose about her shoulders, her lips red and pouting with a smile that seemed quite as much mirthful as sarcastic—with his revolver covering her bright, piquant face; then the ugly implement was lowered, with a bow and a bland smile.

"Persuasion's good, madam, and the pot's yours!"

"Drop it on the table, then—with the muzzle toward yourself, if you please," a little more sharply uttered Adine Aymer, moving a single step into the chamber, but still holding her weapons at a level with a nerve and steadiness such as few would have given her credit for without ocular demonstration.

"Drop it is—and strictly according to Hoyle, ma'am," blandly uttered The Man of Silk, placing the confiscated pistol on the table before him, the butt convenient to Darius Aymer's hand.

"You are wise, and merciful to both—for I'd hate ever so much to be obliged to enforce my commands with a brace of bullets," laughed the little woman, who was "coming out" marvelously.

"I can see that, ma'am," with a low, peculiar laugh that brought a slightly deepened tinge to the smooth cheeks of the woman, despite her self-control. "I can see a chunk of humanity in one of those eyes, as big as a woodchuck, balanced in the other by—beg pardon, but would you mind moving an inch or two to the left, so the light can fall a little more clearly on that exquisite orb of—"

During this brief interchange of words, Darius Aymer had made no interruption, lying back in his chair as he had fallen when The Man of Silk disarmed him so adroitly. But now he started forward, his ghastly countenance tinged with color, his eyes losing something of that pitiful, haunted look, to give place to anger.

"Silence, you reckless scuffer!" he cried, hoarsely, his long fingers twitching nervously. "Is nothing sacred from your infernal sneers? Are you all evil? all rotten beyond redemption?"

"Well, I expect to find out just how bad I am before getting out of this box, unless your tongue goes back on you; or madam yonder gets the cramp in her pretty hands from holding those guns out so long at a stretch. In the latter case, maybe you'll be kind enough to put the sum total on my tombstone for the benefit of posterity. Am I asking too much, dear—is it father, or only uncle you want to be?"

"Heaven grant that you don't force me to be your executioner!"

As he uttered these words, Darius Aymer caught up the pistol which The Man of Silk had resigned on command, and nervously lifted the hammer. A slight exclamation broke from the paling lips of his wife, who took an impulsive step forward, only to stop short as Felix Bland said:

"I don't want to be too critical, dear madam, but if your right-hand battery should chance to go off just now, I wouldn't give a cent for the old gentleman's head as a hat-block! You'd make an adorable widow—so charmingly innocent, and all that—but wouldn't it look and sound better if the title came to you through other hands?"

"You scoffing villain!" panted Adine, turning pale as death herself, but lifting her pistol as she spoke.

"That looks better," and Felix Bland nodded his approval, paying not the slightest attention to Darius Aymer, who had him covered with his pistol. "If it should take a notion to throw up its supper only the ceiling would suffer. Your left hand appears to be the right one, curiously enough. It keeps me lined like a veteran! Strange, such a remarkable difference in—or did you think to remove the entire family at one stroke?"

Sharp, almost fierce came those concluding words, but before Adine could notice them in word or deed, Darius Aymer caught at them quickly, hungrily, dropping his weapon again on the table as he leaned across it.

"At last! You admit it, then, Robert?" The Man of Silk shrugged his shoulders, flinging out his hands from the wrists in French fashion, a slight smile curling his lips.

"Why not, since you are dead—sure you've got the lost chicken? Why persist in denial when each one but makes you the more determined to have me for your son, whether or no? If I own up to being what I never once

suspected I was before meeting you, maybe I'll hit a grub-depôt before my ribs actually cave in on my poor backbone!"

"If not Robert Aymer, how came you with his face?" sharply demanded Adine Aymer. "If not Robert Aymer—"

"My dear madam," with a piteous arching of his brows and another hand gesture. "Must I solve any more riddles? I beg of you, have pity! It's been a solid month since I ate anything more substantial than an evening breeze. If my painful modesty did not forbid, and you had a lightning bug handy, I could show you such an admirable assortment of ribs and backbones and other anatomical curiosities as would cause each particular hair of your delicious little head to out-pork any porcupine this side of animal heaven! And yet you ask me to solve an enigma that even the Sphinx wouldn't have the cheek to sling at a poor devil without first giving him a bite and a sup—to say nothing of a downy couch for a few fleeting hours!"

"Adine," said Darius Aymer, turning his head and appearing for the first time really to realize her presence. "This is no place for you. go to your room, I beg of you."

"For the first time in my life I must refuse to obey, dear husband, when you speak," softly yet firmly uttered the little woman. "I will not leave you alone with this—this—"

"Walking sign of starvation, ma'am," bowed Felix Bland, gravely.

Adine Aymer moved forward with an impulsive sob, dropping her pistols to the floor, sinking on her knees at the side of the old man, her slender arms closing about his neck, her blonde head resting over his heart.

"You have tried to soften him, but in vain! You have begged and prayed, only to have him laugh you to scorn! And worse than that! Only for my coming, he would have murdered you! I can swear to that, for—"

"You saw the horrible deed committed," laughed The Man of Silk.

"Silence, you wretched boy!" cried Aymer, his eyes flashing.

"I am afraid to leave you alone with him, dear husband," softly, brokenly murmured Adine, clinging still closer to the old man, whose arm stole gentle, lovingly about her slender waist. "Let him go—let him go far away from us, never to appear again, I trust! Forget that he ever was your son—your son?" with a sudden outburst of indignant incredulity as she turned her face toward Felix Bland, her eyes flashing as she added: "He never was your son! I would not believe it if an angel should come down from the gates of heaven to swear such a scuffer was your lost boy!"

"Shake, ma'am!" impulsively cried The Man of Silk, leaning forward with outstretched hand, a broad smile lighting up his plain face until it looked almost handsome. "Shake it hard! You're the first sane person I've met since running across this insane asylum! You are—Eh?"

"Your hand!" with a proud arching of her slender neck, a vivid flashing of her big blue eyes as she struck with her tiny clinched fist at his hand. "Touch your hand in friendship. The hand that was so recently lifted against your life, dear Darius!"

A short, choking sob cut her impetuous speech short, and once more she buried her face in the breast of her husband.

"I take it back!" sighed Felix Bland, an expression of intense resignation chasing the smile from his face. "I'll never say it again. If I ever jump at another conclusion, hope my heels may break my blessed neck in twenty-seven distinct pieces!"

"I may stay, dearest?" softly breathed Adine, moving her blonde head just sufficient to permit her baby eyes to reach the face of the old man. "Say I may! For I must! It would be worse than death, this horrible dread of having you alone with such a—monster!"

"If any delicacy about me keeps him from granting your request, ma'am, I hope he'll throw it over the fence without winking twice!" the little man in gray almost eagerly interposed. "Pray take my seat. No thanks, I beg of you! You're entirely welcome—welcome as fresh honey-dew to a famished humming-bird! It's no sacrifice on my part, delightful as I have found your society, both! Fact is, I've got an important engagement to keep, and I'm afraid it will grow cold before I can get a square bite at it!"

"Keep your seat, sir," sharply cried Darius Aymer, as Felix Bland seemed about to abandon his chair, and the revolver from the table was once more bearing full upon his broad breast. "You do not leave this room until you have made full confession of your crimes. Try it, and though I mingle my brains with yours the next moment, I'll forget the mother who bore you—I'll forget all save that your crimes have driven me mad!"

"Still that dismal tune!" ejaculated The Man of Silk, sinking back in his seat, his brows wrinkling, his tones growing colder, more mocking. "All right. Bring on your confession, one or a score. Of course, since you have everything else cut and dried for the occasion, dear

madam, you have it all written out, ready for my signature?"

Darius Aymer once more turned to his young wife, his voice growing softer, more natural as he muttered:

"I beg of you to leave us, pet. This is no story fit for your ears to drink in. And the graceless rascal will only insult you anew. Go to your room, and pray that a father's tears may soften his hard and unrepentant heart. Go, little wife—to please me."

"Only if you command me on peril of your stern displeasure, Darius," cried Adine, rising to her feet, her beautiful face growing pale, but almost hard. "Is it not time that you looked on me as something more than a spoiled child? Have I not earned the right to know all that troubles you, my husband? And in this one particular, especially?"

"You think—you suspect—"

"I know, husband," with softened voice, as one hand caressingly touched his bowed head. "I have known from the first that you were really innocent of this horrible crime. I know now who is guilty. And as your wife—as one who will try to aid you in bearing up under this terrible blow—I beg of you to let me remain."

She did not pause for an answer, but glided rapidly to the door, turning the key in the lock, then returning and picking up the revolvers which she had dropped upon the floor.

Cold and silent Felix Bland listened and watched. That mocking smile was gone from face and eyes. Instead, one would almost swear he was mentally nerving himself for a crisis.

There was a change even more remarkable in Adine Aymer as she drew a chair up to the end of the narrow table, leaning back so that she could glance from face to face without turning her head. Her face was almost devoid of color, save that her lips showed redder than ever. And with that gravity seemed to have come increased age. From a mere child, she became a woman grown, sharp, shrewd, suspicious, ready to take advantage of the slightest error or slip on the part of her adversary.

On her lap lay the twin revolvers, her right hand clasping one, a finger inside the trigger guard. And Felix Bland gave just the shadow of a smile as he saw how true the muzzle covered his body.

"May I tell this—this gentleman the story of the past, as far as I know it, husband?" she asked, glancing into the haggard face of the old man. "You can trust me, dear," she added, as Darius Aymer turned a startled, pained glance toward her. "I am strong enough for that—I am strong enough to do anything that can relieve you of a moment's pain or trouble. May I?"

"If you think it will do any good, but—"

"If nothing else, it will explain why we have troubled Mr. Felix Bland—is that the name, for this evening?"

"I thought you preferred calling me Robert Aymer, step-mother?" with a short, disagreeable laugh. "But I'm not kicking about a simple name, when there's so many nice ones laying around loose. Let it be Felix Bland, then."

"Until you are shamed or forced into acknowledging the right one, Felix Bland shall be the name, then," coldly retorted Adine, her eyes half-closing as she lay back in her chair, watching the face of The Man of Silk, like one determined not to lose the faintest change or alteration. "And now I'll try to explain why we have troubled your honor so persistently. Though so full of wretchedness and sin and ingratitude, it is a story that can be easily condensed."

"Let us be thankful for small mercies!" murmured Bland, meekly.

"Two years ago, more or less, Darius Aymer was cashier in the Merchant's Bank, of Chicago," said Adine, her voice cold and almost monotonous as she continued. "In the whole city there was not another man more trusted, more honored—and never a man drew the breath of life who better deserved this trust and honor!"

"For years he had faithfully filled that responsible position, and during all this time, not the faintest breath of suspicion ever blew in his direction. His word was better than another man's bond."

"On a certain Monday—never mind the date—when the proper time comes, all this will be supplied, if you demand particulars—the city was startled by a tale of crime. The Merchant's Bank had been robbed of an immense sum of money and securities. The watchman was murdered—his skull beaten in, evidently by a blow dealt from behind, and his throat was cut from ear to ear!"

"Decidedly butchery!" murmured Felix Bland, one hand going up to cover a yawn, real or admirably pretended.

"The body of the murdered man was found only when one of the clerks opened the bank, at the usual hour in the morning. Of course he was infinitely startled, and lost little time in giving the warning."

"Officers of the law came, and set about investigating the matter."

"They found the murdered man cold and stiff, and decided that he must have been dead

for many hours: probably since early the night before, if not still longer.

"They found the bank had been robbed. The vault was opened, its many fastenings having apparently been forced or unlocked by skill, without injuring the mechanism in the least. The safe inside, where the money and securities had been deposited, was open, the door bearing powder marks, as though it had been blown open, after the usual fashion. There were marks of a drill, and everything to show that this was the method of entering."

"The safe had been thoroughly cleaned out by those cool and shrewd enough to select the valuable portion from that which could not be turned into cash without too great a risk. In money alone, nearly a hundred thousand dollars were taken! In securities, almost double that amount was missing."

"A royal haul, indeed!" murmured The Man of Silk, with a faint smile upon his face, and a curious light in the brown eyes that never wavered from the pale face of the little woman.

"As who should know, better than—"

"Don't spoil a story for relation sake, step-mother!" laughed Felix Bland, with a slight shrug of his shoulders. "Of course I did the deed—in your mind!"

"You confess then, Robert?" gasped Darius Aymer, faintly.

"As Robert, I don't mind, if it will give you any pleasure. As Felix, I prefer to wait for further developments before fully committing myself," was the cool response.

With a low, hopeless sigh, the old man sunk back in his chair, his head drooping, his whole person the picture of despair.

"While the excitement of the investigation was at its height, the chief cashier came in. At first his presence was hardly noticed, and when it was, and his pale face and trembling form attracted attention, all was naturally set down to the same terrible shock each and every one connected with the establishment had experienced."

"The case was immediately placed into the hands of Pinkerton's Agency, and before a new day dawned, Darius Aymer was arrested as one concerned in the dreadful crime, if not the sole operator!"

"But it was all a mistake—a frightful mistake!" moaned the old man, his trembling hands going up to his head, pressing his temples as though to keep them from splitting open.

"We know—the whole world knows that, darling!" murmured Adine, as she leaned over and gently touched his haggard cheek with her red lips. "Even when things looked the blackest, no one who really knew you—no one save those professional skeptics, the detectives—for an instant believed that you had aught to do with the murder and robbery."

"You are kind to say so, Adine, but I know different," brokenly added the poor old man, shaking his snow-white head. "I saw it in the papers—I read it in the actions of those whom I met on the street! Robert!" turning to The Man of Silk, with intense yearning in his face and voice, holding out his quivering hands; only to sink back again as he saw how cold, how hard, how unmoved was that face.

"There is no hope!" he muttered, barely above his breath. "Hard and pitiless! No hope—save in death!"

"There is hope, husband!" cried Adine, her eyes flashing, her face filling with color as she passed one arm about his shivering frame. "I tell you to hope—I swear to you that the real criminal shall be unmasked before the whole world! He shall admit his crime, and thus lift even the shadow of suspicion from your wrecked life! I tell you this. I say it, and never yet have I lied to you—my husband!"

"Wake me up when you're ready to go on with your little history, will you, ma'am?" sleepily murmured The Man of Silk, slipping further down in his chair, his hands gliding into his pockets, his chin drooping upon his bosom.

A short, metallic laugh caused him to suddenly resume his former position, winking his brown eyes rapidly as he stared into the face of the little woman opposite.

"Wake you up? Indeed I will, Felix Bland!" she cried, her face colder and harder than before. "No more digressions. Plain, straight business from this moment on."

"So kind—thanks."

"The detectives told their story, true or false. They declared that the safe door had been mutilated, had been drilled and powder-burnt after being opened in the regular way. And they pledged their professional honor to that effect. More—they brought two experts in safe and lock making, who swore to the same effect. And it was on this testimony that Darius Aymer was placed under arrest."

"At the preliminary examination, damaging facts came out and bore heavily against the cashier. First, he could not produce his key to the rifled safe. He declared that he had it safe when he left the bank at four o'clock on Saturday afternoon; that he placed it safely in his private desk, at his rooms, as was his custom. When Monday brought wild rumors of some terrible event at the bank, he had hastened there in

such excitement that he never once thought of his keys. When he did look for them, they were gone. And a sum of money which he kept in the same secret drawer was also missing. Doubtless he had been robbed of both money and the keys."

"All the rest of the bank officials produced or accounted for the keys in their possession. Only the cashier failed; and failing, he was committed for trial as the probable criminal."

"The trial was hurried along, for the heavy loss greatly crippled the bank, and believing that they had caught the robber, they hoped to regain the stolen wealth by convicting him of the crime."

"At the trial, the missing keys told strongly against the accused. His account was deemed but a poor excuse to cover his sin. And it was remembered how agitated he appeared when first reaching the bank. It was remembered how he shrunk from the body of the murdered watchman; a score of trifles which at the time passed without comment or notice, were recalled now and made the most of. And when the prosecution closed their case, odds were heavily in favor of conviction. So heavy that muttered threats of lynching were to be heard on all sides."

"The cashier was placed on the stand as the first witness for the defense, not a little to the amazement of the court, as well as spectators. He told his story briefly, and clearly. He said that his keys must have been stolen by the real criminal during his absence from home. He swore that he left home quite early on Sunday morning, and remained absent until early Monday morning. Only this; he would say no more, even when cross-examined by the prosecution. He refused to say where he passed all those hours, during which the crime was committed, although his own lawyers urged him to do so, telling him that unless he did so, he would surely be condemned."

"When he was told he might sit down, he obeyed. His lawyers did their best to aid him, showing that no one had sworn to seeing the accused during those four-and-twenty hours in town. But it was a poor chance, and they were about to give over in despair, when a note was passed to the leading counsel. He opened it, changed color, then caused a name to be called; and a witness for the defense took the stand to be sworn."

"That witness swore Darius Aymer passed the hours when the murder and robbery must have been committed, miles away from the scene of the crime. That witness swore on oath that Darius Aymer was never out of sight of that witness for ten minutes during the time he came, early on Sunday morning, until he departed, early on Monday morning. That witness swore to all this. And that witness was—"

"Adine! my darling!" gasped Darius Aymer, holding out a trembling hand as though to check her further speech. "Be silent! Have you not suffered enough on my behalf? Need you expose yourself to the mocking sneers of this wretched sinner?"

"It was all for you, my husband!" murmured Adine, slipping from her chair and kneeling at his side, the revolvers dropping unheeded to the floor, her arms about his waist, her face upturned, a soft glow in her big blue eyes. "I did not hesitate then, why should I now? It was all in the papers, and if this man is indeed Robert Aymer, he must have seen and read it when the story of the trial was published!"

"I think I remember something about it," slowly uttered Felix Bland, his voice calm and unmoved. "There was a cry made against this unexpected witness, if I remember aright. It was said that a wife could not bear witness in favor of her husband, or something of the sort?"

Adine bowed her face from view, but Darius Aymer drew his gaunt form erect, his arms clasping her tightly, his face filled with strongly contrasting emotions: love, almost adoration for her; reproach, almost hatred for the man whom he declared was his son.

"You deserted me, Robert Aymer! You left me to bear the penalty of your crime! And only for this poor angel, I would have suffered the full penalty of the law for the deed *your* red hands committed!"

"Have I not my reward, darling?" softly murmured Adine, lifting her blushing face to receive the kiss his lips offered, then turning again to The Man of Silk, she added, rapidly: "I was that witness. I swore to all I have told you, and when the prosecution objected, I confessed the whole truth! I was not the prisoner's wife! We were not married! We were not even betrothed lovers!"

"Really, a most delightful *alibi*!" laughed Felix Bland.

"Silence, you cur!" grated Darius Aymer. "You sneer at the angel who saved *my* life, endangered by *your* crime? Robber—assassin!"

CHAPTER XIII.

THE BANK ROBBERY, AS IT OCCURRED.

"ANYTHING to keep peace in the family," coolly uttered The Man of Silk, his head a little on one side as he viewed the really charming

picture made by Adine just then. "A most abominable *alibi*, then! The worst I ever met in the whole course of— Eh? Wrong again! Now I will button up my lip and never utter a word more without you first put it in plain print and tack on an oath that it is purely inoffensive, and guarantee it not to cut in the eye nor run down at the heel!"

"Robert—my son—"

"I am not Robert. I am not your son. I have no father living."

"You still persist in denying your identity?"

"Now let me do a little talking, will you? And do you listen for a change," bluntly interposed Felix Bland, leaning forward and gazing quickly from face to face as he resumed: "Whether I acknowledge to being the man you apparently believe me, or whether I deny it, you are disgruntled just the same. So, as the cost is the same, from this time on I'm going to stick to the truth."

"If you only would!" impulsively cried the old man.

"I don't claim to be an angel nor a saint. I admit that I have passed under more names than one during my life. I own to having committed many an action of which I am heartily ashamed whenever I have spare time enough to take a peep over the past. But of those names, none began with Robert. Of those crimes, if the word suits you better than mistakes or peccadilloes, bank robbery is not listed. And though there may be more or less red stains on my hands, murder never made one of them. When I have taken life, it was in self-defense, or in bringing to justice those who had violated all human law."

"You can keep on calling me Robert Aymer if it pleases you. You can accuse me of all the crimes in the decalogue if that suits your book best. But I'll decline the one and deny the other, as long as I can do so with perfect truth. Now go on with your rat-killing!"

Felix Bland resumed his former careless position, his hands rammed almost to their elbows in his pockets, his legs stretched out at full length, resting on his heels.

"It is useless, dear," murmured Adine, softly. "Argument will not shake him, and he is proof against pleading and prayer. Leave him to the fate his obstinacy invites, and his crimes merit!"

"Mine, or the crimes of the fellow you are trying to flog over my miserable shoulders?" dryly asked The Man of Silk.

Darius Aymer hesitated, glancing from one face to the other, the troubled light in his eyes deepening as he looked at the little woman. To her he spoke, his tones low and full of love that was almost adoration:

"I must try all means—I must make one more attempt to shake his icy nerve, to touch his callous heart, Adine. But you must not stay here. Go to your room, and try to get a little rest. You are looking worn and poorly." "We are growing old together, Darius," with a cooing little laugh.

Felix Bland smiled with cold contempt as he heard this, as he saw the white-haired husband bend to touch that bright, babyish face with his pallid lips. Plainly than words that smile told what he thought: a charming little hypocrite; a doting old man.

"You will go, little wife? You will leave us together for a time?"

But Adine shook her head willfully.

"I will not go. I will not leave you alone with this man. I have trusted you fully, entirely—"

"God knows you have, darling!" with sudden fervor.

"Is it not time that you began to trust me, then?" she murmured, tears dimming the blue eyes that gazed pleadingly up into his. "Is it not time that I fully understood why you have suffered so much? Why you, whom I know to be innocent of all wrong, permit the—"

"You shall stay, Adine," he interposed, one hand touching her red lips and cutting her impetuous speech short. "As you say, it is full time you knew all—you shall know all that I have kept hidden in my aching breast until now. And if you suffer, wretched boy!" turning with cold severity upon The Man of Silk, "if you suffer in having the mask torn from the black past, blame not me—blame your own evil nature, your own stubborn refusal to make amends for your sins, at least in part."

"Don't borrow trouble on my account, I beg of you, dear sir!" bowed Felix Bland, with a smile of meek resignation. "I'm growing used to suffering. I reckon if it keeps on raining suffering as it has been raining on my devoted head for the past few hours, I'll actually begin to feel lost without something of the sort. Suffer me some more."

This flippancy seemed to be just what Darius Aymer needed to restore his strength, his usual stern composure, which he had lost on so unexpectedly meeting this man with the face of his long-lost son. Even The Man of Silk showed his surprise at the sudden and complete change which came over the old gentleman, and Adine gently drew back, resuming her seat, her eyes glowing vividly as she watched and listened.

"Your buffoonery will not save you, wretched boy!" sternly cried the old man, his bony hands

clutching tightly as they lay on the table before him. "Only one thing can: your humble submission, your full confession, your making what feeble reparation lies in your power at this distant day."

"Anything short of putting my precious neck in a noose, dear sir," with a light laugh. "I must insist on drawing the line at that."

"I admit that you have some excuse for hating me, father though I am," with a brief faltering, a momentary shaking of his tones, only to recover as quickly. "I know now that you suffered much in the days gone by. I know that I treated you with far more harshness than you deserved. I know that I wronged you in word and deed; but it was not willfully, not through malice or hatred, as you believed at the time."

"Pray don't mention it," with a careless gesture. "I assure you I'd never have known how much I suffered in those days had you not mentioned it. Strange how one will forget, is it not?" smilingly.

"I cannot forget so easily," with a shiver. "I remember how that artful woman made me believe she was all that is pure and holy and loving. I remember how fully I trusted her, how completely she had me under the spell of her charms, her fascinations."

"How strangely history repeats itself," softly murmured Felix Bland, gazing through his half-closed lids into the babyish face of the little woman opposite.

A faint flush came into her cheeks, then faded as swiftly. For one instant her blue eyes flashed into his, then turned again to the haggard face of her husband.

He was gazing at vacancy, a pained expression upon his worn features. He started as her warm hand stole into his. He smiled as he turned his head to look at her, then, seeming to recover his mental powers, to gather renewed strength from that look, he resumed:

"It is true, and I acknowledge it with abasement. I was the poor fool men called me, when I picked that woman out of the gutter and married her. I was worse than a fool in putting her in the place left vacant by my first wife, your mother—an angel on earth, even as I feel she is an angel in heaven now."

"Amen," solemnly uttered Felix Bland, with an earnestness that drew a little cry from the lips of Adine Aymer.

"You admit it, then?"

"I was thinking of my mother, not of Mrs. Aymer," was the cold response.

"And you still deny that—"

"I deny nothing. I'm waiting to find out just who and what I am. May that happy discovery be made before gaunt starvation claims me for its own. But it's got to hurry up its cakes—indeed it has, now."

Adine sunk back in her chair, biting her red lips impatiently. Was it ever to be thus? Would this cool demon never yield?

"You know I was rich then," resumed Darius Aymer, his tones still cold and even, his face showing no ray of hope, only a dogged resolution to carry out the plan he had formed. "I know now what was whispered freely enough at the time by my friends, that she married me only for my money. And I know now, what I would not believe then, that she set systematically to work in hopes of driving you away, or in making me disinherit my only son."

"She carried out her plans with the skill of a thoroughly evil woman. She made me look upon you as a hypocrite, as a liar, as a thief, even. She stole from me, and then fastened the crime upon you."

"And yet you ask me to receive another step-mother," murmured The Man of Silk, as Darius Aymer choked and paused.

If Darius Aymer caught the words, he paid them no heed. He steadied his voice, and went on:

"I charged you with all this, you remember. You denied, and I might have believed you, but for the devilish art of that woman. She held me chained by her arts, and I was but a puppet in her hands. She painted you blacker and blacker, and I mistook your wild denials, your wilder charges against her, as but further proof of your utter wickedness. And then—may Heaven forgive me if, as I fear, that treatment drove you utterly to the bad. And then, I flogged you until the blood stained my hands and your back!"

"Worse and worse, and more of it," muttered Felix, frowning.

"But why go on?" with a quaver in his tones, a softer light in his sunken eyes. "You know what followed. You know the last black charge which that vile wretch dared to bring against you. I believed it then, though I long since knew how foully she lied—on her death-bed she softened and confessed all her sins. Then I was insane with rage, and you know how brutally I flogged you, how I almost killed you outright! And in the morning you were gone—gone without a word! Gone to be lost sight of for so many long years. And—God forgive me! I prayed that death might be your portion as just penalty for the atrocious crime I believed you had attempted!"

Shivering, the old man bowed his head upon his crossed arms. Only for an instant. Then

he looked up, tears in his eyes, his voice barely articulate, as he said:

"Robert, I ask your forgiveness for all I made you suffer, through the truly infernal arts of that fiend in human shape! Forgive me, my son! Forgive me—and in turn I will forgive you for the wrong you have since done me."

Breathlessly Adine Aymer watched and listened. Her eyes were full of ardent light. Her red lips were parted as she leaned forward, gazing into the pale face of the little man in gray. No one who saw her face then would have taken it for that of a gay, careless child.

But no one was watching her just then. Darius Aymer, hope renewed in his aching heart by the softened light in those brown eyes, was gazing beseechingly into the face of Felix Bland. And The Man of Silk, all trace of levity or mockery banished, was meeting that gaze as he gently uttered:

"If it can do you any good, dear sir, I'll say it with all my heart. If you have ever wronged me, I forgive you."

"Robert! my son!"

But Felix Bland drew back, shaking his head slowly, decidedly, just the shadow of a frown coming into his face, as he said gravely:

"That's one step further than I can go, Mr. Aymer. I have no father, as I've assured you time and time again."

"Then your pretended forgiveness is a lie!" impetuously cried the old man, his gaunt figure drawing erect, his sunken eyes blazing. "You still hold the old grudge! You are determined to make me suffer for your crime to the bitter end!"

"Well, I wouldn't put it in just that light, do you know," slowly drawled The Man of Silk, once more the cool, mocking sport. "Say—I decline to accept a step-mother, charming as she certainly is!" with a low bow to Adine, whose face was a curious study just then. "That I am so stubborn, blame yourself, dear sir," with a little laugh. "You acknowledge making a terrible mistake once, and so—"

Darius Aymer caught up the pistol between them, covering The Man of Silk as he grated fiercely:

"Dare to utter as much as a hint against my wife and I'll end all this wretched trouble by scattering your brains to the winds!"

"That settles it, my dear sir," meekly. "I never argue against a dead sure thing. I'm dumb."

"Make him confess all, or send a bullet through his skull!" sharply uttered Adine, her voice strained and unnatural.

"It may come to that in the end," said Darius Aymer, with a shiver as he drew back, his armed hand dropping to the table. "But I will keep to the line I marked out at first. I will give you one more chance, you wretched boy!"

"If it's only half a chance I'll jump at it like a bullfrog at a bluebottle! This pulling guns and never using them is growing mighty wearing on the nerves. I'm not used to it, you see! When I see the drop coming I prepare to fly over the range, according to the rules made and provided for such emergencies. And to have all that trouble for nothing—well, it wears on a fellow."

"The next time I cover you with a pistol it will be to shoot," coldly retorted Darius Aymer. "Now listen to the true story of that black crime. I will try and tell it in few words. If I dwelt on it as I might I'd kill you before half the story was told."

"Put it in shorthand then, I beg of you. I'd be so ashamed to go to glory, and have to ask for a crust of bread as my opening petition."

"I was innocent of the double crime," steadily began Darius Aymer, without noticing the flippant interjection, "yet the testimony that cleared me was false from beginning to end! The true story has never yet been put in words. Only I and you know just what happened."

"Pray I'd forgotten all about it," meekly murmured Bland. "Tell it all from a to zard. I've got a parl down-stairs who'd give a pretty penny to have the whole story written out for him."

"He may know it when the rest of mankind gains the knowledge," was the significant retort. "Whether that will be the whole truth depends entirely upon the decision you make when I have finished. If it is as I hope and pray, he will never know the name of the real criminal. If it is as I fear—then he can learn even that name."

"Sort o' playin' both ends against the middle, eh?"

"Look here, Mr. Bland," coldly interposed Adine, clicking the hammer of her weapon as she spoke. "You are wasting precious time with your frivolous interruptions. Keep silence until you are bidden speak, or take the consequences!"

"I'm awful hungry, but I can't eat everything. I draw the line at blue pills, and henceforth consider me a clam, will you?"

The Man of Silk closed his lips tightly, sinking back in his chair and ramming his hands once more into his pockets.

Darius Aymer frowned, but resumed his account of the robbery:

"Besides declaring my innocence, almost the only point of truth brought out in that trial was the fact of my keys being stolen. They were stolen, and my money went with them: but I knew when they went and in whose possession."

"I was living alone, as I had lived ever since my—since that woman died. I came to Chicago in hopes of gaining information concerning my runaway son. I failed to realize that hope, and though I never forgot, in time I grew more contented. Thus it was that I entered into business, finally reaching the responsible post I held at the time I speak of."

"I was sleeping soundly that Saturday night, when I was awakened by a savage grip on my throat, and I opened my eyes to see a masked face bending over me, and a gloved hand holding a knife at my throat."

"I was threatened with instant death in case I struggled or tried to raise an alarm, and even in that awful moment I fancied there was something dimly familiar in the tones that I heard."

"I was bound securely, and one man held a knife at my breast, while another questioned me. They demanded the keys to the bank, and swore if I refused, they would kill me. Still I refused to tell them. And, in the end, they were found in my desk after a close search. More than that, the secret of the safe was also discovered."

"When the combination was changed, shortly before, I noted it down as a safeguard against a defective memory."

"But this I did not think of then. My poor brain was whirling, my heart was full of a stupefying misery. For during the search, the mask of the head robber dropped off, and by the light of the lamp, I saw his face for an instant. Only an instant, but long enough to recognize it as that of my wretched son."

"The shock stunned me, and as the robber turned with a savage oath to see if I had noticed his mishap, my eyes were closed, my head drooping like that of a man in a swoon. Only for that, I doubt if the light of another day would have shone upon my living face. I believe that Robert Aymer would have added parricide to his other sins."

His voice trembling and choked, Darius Aymer ceased speaking for a brief space. Adine watched The Man of Silk keenly, but not a muscle of his countenance altered. He sat in perfect silence, as though he was indeed as dumb as the clam to which he had likened himself.

"I was left, bound hand and foot, with a gag in my mouth," continued Darius Aymer, speaking rapidly, like one who fears to dwell on the terrible events of that night. "Hours later I was discovered by a friend, who released me. I told him my story, all save naming the man whose bared face chance had shown me. I begged him to give the alarm at once, for I found myself unable to stand upon my feet."

"Instead, he questioned me with what I considered useless minuteness, but I was not long left in the dark. He showed me how terribly I would be involved should the bank have been robbed. He told me what I could now see for myself, that I would be looked upon as an accomplice, if not the actual thief. My keys were gone. The combination was learned by the robbers, through my carelessness. Thus aided, surely they would take the shortest, surest method of getting at the cash. And when the robbery was investigated, what was I to do when questioned? Who would believe my strange story? No one."

"When satisfied that I fully lied the nature of my position, my friend wove out and satisfied himself, without awaking curiosity, that the robbery had indeed been completed. He came back and told me as much. And then—with the aid of this noble woman," one hand gently, lovingly touching Adine on the arm as he resumed, "we agreed to the *alibi* which I attempted to afterward carry out."

"Not just as you heard it from her lips. I would never have consented to that terrible sacrifice, for though I did not love her as I do now—as I did when she stood before that scoffing crowd and took to herself a mantle of glorious shame in order to save my life, I was too much of a man to accept such a bitter sacrifice!"

"Her testimony was false, but it was heroic. All that time I lay hidden in my rooms, broken down, grieving far more for the sin with which my wayward son had covered his soul, than for my own peril. And those two faithful friends plotted and planned together to clear me from the guilt which was not mine!"

"You know what the verdict was, not guilty! I left court a free man, but I knew that nine out of every ten there felt I should have been hung for murder. And, only for you, darling, I wish I had been."

"Not so, husband," softly murmured Adine, yielding to his encircling arm. "The dawn is breaking. The truth shall come to light, and once more you will take your place among men, as loved and honored as of yore! The real criminal must take your place, and—"

She broke off with a sharp cry of mingled ter-

ror and rage, as a clear, metallic click caught her ear. She turned to face The Man of Silk, who was sitting upright in his chair, smiling icily over the barrel of a revolver, the dark bore of which stared her full in the face.

"I reckon it's my turn to do the highfalutin' just now," grimly muttered Felix Bland, following her shrinking face with that ugly tool. "And I'm going to do it to the queen's taste, too, bet your precious life, step-mother!"

"Robert! hold your hand!" gasped Darius Aymer, his own trembling fingers clutching at the revolver on the table before him.

"Steady, old gentleman," sharply muttered the little man in gray, but without turning his aim a hair's breadth. "I don't want to make you a widower, but I'll have to do it in a holy second if you don't turn it up! Hands off, if you please! I've played clam like a little man, and now I'm going to talk a little out in meeting. You listen!"

"Coward!" gasped Adine, her blue eyes flashing fire, although she still shrunk from that steady aim. "You dare not shoot!"

"I don't exactly yearn to pull trigger, ma'am, but I'll do it in preference to letting you twist a noose about my dainty neck. And I'll certainly spoil that pretty face of yours unless the old gent keeps his fingers out of the pie. Just tell him so, will you?"

There was no particular need of this. At the peril which so unexpectedly threatened the one whom he loved better than all the world beside, Darius Aymer was deserted by his fictitious powers. He trembled like a leaf. He sunk back in his chair, shivering as in a palsy.

A swift, sidelong glance showed The Man of Silk as much, and he laughed softly as he spoke again:

"He throws up his hand, and the pot lies between you and me, little fascinator! As you see, I've got a full hand. And you?"

"Lose now, but I swear to win in the end!" with vicious energy.

"You may, but not unless you change your style of play. I am not the man who robbed the Merchants' Bank, though I don't suppose you'll take my word for it."

"Hardly—against his testimony!" with a short, hard laugh. "A father should know his own child, surely!"

"Should, but it seems that rule has its exceptions, as in this case before us," was the cool retort. "I tell you that I am not the criminal. If I am crowded any further, I may be tempted to strike back by publishing all I have listened to this night! I don't want to do it, for man-hunting isn't at all in my line; but I'll have to if I'm pressed to the wall."

"I'm going to leave you now. You can discuss the matter between yourselves, and decide what is the wisest course to pursue. If you want to tackle me again, I'll not be hard to find. Just whisper my name—Felix Bland, not Robert Aymer—and I'll turn up like a bad penny!"

"One word more. You noticed my big pard, Baby John Barcus? It may be of interest to you to know that he is also on the trail of the man who robbed that bank and killed the watchman. He accused me of being Robert Aymer, this evening, but I convinced him of his error. If you like, I'll send him up to interview you on the matter. He's no slouch, if he does look like one when he takes the notion. If you can prove to his satisfaction that I am Robert Aymer, and the real criminal, he'll go for me after a fashion that'll make your sweet heart fairly slop over with delight!"

"I don't want to see him!" muttered the little woman, turning still paler, if that be possible. "If I do, I know where to find him, without troubling you!" she added, quickly, snappishly.

"A quick recovery, but not quick enough to—Eh?" with an assumption of surprise. "Was I talking in my dreams? Forget it, I beg of you, dear madam! I wouldn't hint for all the world! And least of all that so charming a creature as you could have even the ghost of an objection to meeting a detective!"

"Robert—my son!" faintly muttered Darius Aymer.

"May you find him, pure and innocent as when you drove him out into the wide world, a homeless wanderer!" gravely uttered Felix Bland, as he arose and stepped backward to the door, still holding Adine Aymer covered with his revolver.

He unlocked the door, opened it and passed through, quickly closing the barrier behind him. As he did so, he sprang lightly to one side, but the shot which he plainly anticipated did not come. And with a low, mocking laugh, The Man of Silk hastened down the stairs and out into the night, meeting no one in so doing. But as he turned the corner of the hotel, entering the deep shade cast by the building, a crushing blow fell upon his head from behind, and he sunk to the ground with a moan.

CHAPTER XIV.

A PERSISTENT LOVER.

IN true, love-lorn style, Little Puss Curtis was sitting at her one small window gazing out upon the night, too wretched to think of sleep, utterly miserable as she thought of the quarrel

between the two men who comprised all the world in her eyes. To her it seemed perfectly natural that the face of Posey Curtis, now angry, now grave, now sad and wistful, should rise before her mind's eye quite as often and fully as distinctly as did that of her lover, Booth Barrett.

After all he had been so kind, so tender to her through the long and earnest talk they had that night on the doorstep: so good and loving in all save granting her one great longing. And when he came to realize how shamefully his mind had been abused—when he came to know dear Booth as dear Booth really was—why, he would be kind on that one point, as well!

So Little Puss thought, and so she repeated time and time again just beneath her breath, until at last she really began to believe in the certainty of this glad reconciliation. Why should it not be? She loved them both so dearly!

As she listened she could hear the faint sounds of Posey Curtis's breathing in the outer room. Poor daddy! He was so worn, so weary after those long tramps of his! Not even sorrow could keep him awake.

It had been so ever since he brought her back to that little stone cabin, nearly three years before this night; brought her back, for dimly, something like one recalls objects in an almost forgotten dream, she could remember having lived there when but a child. Brought her back from Denver where she had passed all the intervening time at school.

Little Puss thought of the home-coming and how delighted she was when Posey, like a great overgrown schoolboy in all save his wondrous gentleness and care for the child he had brought home, began giving her lessons in target-shooting, in hunting and fishing; what he called her mountain schooling.

And from thinking of this, her thoughts roved still further away, back over the life-history which he had opened before her marveling ears; not all at once, but in bits and snatches which gradually fitted into each other like pieces of a magic square, to form a perfect whole when all was collected.

It would be no easy task to follow her thoughts and fit them into a shapely chain, but something of importance may be extracted from them, since events were brewing which would be difficult to fully understand without some such explanation.

Posey Curtis, as he was alone known in mining circles, could date his gold-hunting experience back to the earliest craze of '49. At that date he was a stout, hale country youth, working on a farm in Posey county, Indiana, at starvation wages. He had little education, but he could read, and he eagerly drank in all he could find concerning that marvelous discovery of the precious yellow metal in the faraway land of the setting sun. And then, with his fortune on his back—a little bundle which one might almost have crammed into one's pocket—Harvey Curtis left the farm to "make a spoon or spoil a horn!"

Never mind following him through his travels of that early day. Enough that he did not fail altogether. No honest youth could entirely fail, who had grit and perseverance enough to start from the Missouri River on foot, wheeling a barrow before him, alone, bound for California! To start alone, to cross the vast desert as it then was, and to get there! This Harvey Curtis accomplished.

The gold fever never entirely died out of his blood, however. He was never fully content to settle down and live a humdrum life in a sleepy neighborhood. He came back from California with a snug little sum in his pockets, a hero in the eyes of those who had prophesied all manner of misfortunes when he made known his awful resolution. He had no relatives to keep him there, and soon he wandered off again. Only to return, at odd spells, he could not himself have told just why, at first.

When he did find out, he put his fate to the touch as boldly as when he set his face toward the far-away land of gold. And for a number of years the adventurer settled down, the model of a perfect husband and husbandman.

That was long, long years after the gold fever had first attacked him, and there were a few silver threads to be found among his jetty locks. It is rare indeed that one ever fully recovers from such a fever; that one can rest contented after having tasted such a wild, free life; but while his wife lived, Curtis seemed contented enough.

She died, and left a little babe behind her; the first that had been given unto them. And then Curtis yielded to the fire which had only smoldered during this quiet interval. He placed the infant in good hands, and once more struck out for the mining regions: much nearer now than when he first felt the bite of the yellow demon.

Never mind the date. It was before the discovery of the Black Hills treasure; after the Cherry Creek excitement; before Leadville sprung up like a mushroom in a night, though silver was king, and gold was almost out of date.

But Curtis—long since "Posey" Curtis, from his fond memories of his native county—was too old to change his notions, and there was

nothing like gold for him; he would as soon have thought of going on a prospecting trip to the moon, as of looking for a silver lode.

In the course of time he "made a strike" at his business: that of "pocket-mining." He found a rich deposit of the precious metal in a lonely region where the feet of white man had never trod, as it seemed. Day after day, week after week, month after month he worked alone, adding to his store, and still the placer seemed as rich as ever. Then, when the first snows of winter began to fall, he packed his mules and struck out for civilization.

In the spring he returned, and with him came Little Puss, then five years old and past. She watched him while he built a snug stone cabin, passing the bright days in the sun, the cold nights under the brush hut and kept warm in his loving arms, upon his broad bosom. And there they were found, the following spring, by a party of prospectors who, by some strange instinct, such as guides a vulture to its quarry, followed a trail that was no trail, pursued a clew that none of them could describe, until it ended here.

Before the summer was half gone the gold deposit was exhausted.

With the rest of the gold-hunters, Posey Curtis and Little Puss drifted away from the valley, but not to stay forever. Dearly as he loved his little child, Posey was wise enough to know that he must either give up the wild, free life that was second nature to him, or else part with the laughing little child, for her own good. And thus, after many a long and secret battle with himself, Posey Curtis took Little Puss to Denver and left her with the widow of one who had toiled and suffered, persevered and conquered with him in the gold-hunt. Left her to be taught all that a girl should learn. Left her and wandered back to the now desolate cabin by the worked-out placer.

It would be a good point from whence to branch out in quest of another modest bonanza, and though nothing was left of "Posey's Pocket" but the little stone cabin—for the season had been so short that those who joined in the rush had contented themselves with huts of brush—it seemed more like home to him than any other spot on the footstool.

There was another rush some years afterward, and Posey Curtis was at the bottom of it, though unwillingly as unwittingly.

In one of his trips to Denver to see his Little Puss, he chanced to mention a discovery he had made while prospecting for gold. It was just when the silver excitement was most extravagant, and as a result, a party of men hastened to visit the spot. And that visit was the foundation of the present Posey's Pocket.

In silent scorn Posey declined to have aught to do with this new boom. He "had no use for silver," he said. A claim was recorded in his name, and as the "city" sprung up, those whom he had unwittingly guided to fortune, caused all legal "assessments" to be worked out on the claim, thus holding it sacred in his name, until he flatly refused to have anything to do with it.

He brought Little Puss back with him one spring, and they had lived together ever since. Not a single cloud had ever risen between them until this luckless day.

Although rumor had it that Posey Curtis was a rich man—some went so far as to declare him a millionaire miser, who could at any hour place his hand on the ransom of an empire—he still spent much of his time in wandering through the mountain defiles and ridges, prospecting for gold. And it was from one of these trips that he returned just in time to save the four miners from a cruel, treacherous death at the hands of the masks who had rescued Red Bergum from the rope.

Much of this passed through the busy brain of Little Puss as she sat at her window, looking out upon the bright, still night. To give a start and shrink back, though still gazing with wide eyes across the gentle slope at the dark figure of a man who was slowly, cautiously drawing nearer the little stone cabin. Not from fear did she shrink at first, for the eyes of love are very keen at times, and she instantly recognized Booth Barrett, the one whom Posey Curtis had sworn to shoot down without mercy if he ever dared to trespass on his claim again.

Only on second thoughts did she recall this threat. When she did, her fluttering heart seemed to turn to stone within her bosom.

What if her father should awaken? What if he should discover Booth Barrett, and in the first heat of passion carry out his fierce threat?

Shivering, trembling, yet unable to do aught, the poor girl watched the prowler as he slowly came nearer, mentally praying that he might turn away and never return—until the skies were brighter, until her patient love and quiet suffering had won Posey over to their side.

Silent and ghost-like the lover moved, not a sound betraying his movements. Nearer and nearer, until Puss could no longer doubt his intentions, until she knew he was desperately resolved to gain speech with her, even at the risk of death as one of the road-agents.

She saw him draw nearer the little window which he knew opened into her room, and fear

lent her strength to lean forward and frantically motion him to flight.

Instead, with a low, glad murmur, he sprang forward.

"My love! True-hearted Little Puss," he murmured as he reached the side of the cabin and caught her fluttering hands, pressing them to his lips, then folding them above his heart, passionate love lighting up his face until, to her, terrified though she was, it seemed more handsome, more noble, than that of a demigod. "You were waiting and watching for me. You knew I would come."

"Go—for my sake, go!" she gasped, turning her head as she fancied a sound of footsteps came from the outer room. "He'll kill you! Go, if you love me!"

"If I love you, Little Puss?" murmured Booth, with true lovingly reproach in his tones, a mournful smile upon his face as he still clasped those trembling hands to his bosom. "If I love you! Have I not proved it as man seldom is called upon to prove his love? Think of to-day. Think of what I suffered, all for your sake!"

"Father will awaken—he sleeps so lightly," murmured Puss, half-frantic with fear. "I beg you will go—some other time—"

"I never refused your lightest wish before, Little Puss, but I must refuse you in this," gravely responded Barrett, his features becoming hard-set and almost stern. "I have come back to learn the whole truth from your lips, and though death awaits me, I must—"

"It will—it does! He swore to shoot you on sight if he ever caught you near this place again! Go, dear Booth—for my sake!"

"When I have told you all, Little Puss," was the grave, cold reply. "When you have told me what he said that has changed your love to bitter hatred, then—"

A low, pained sob parted her lips. Not a word, but none was needed. That sob told all, and from gloom to gladness changed her lover's face.

"You are true and loving still, Little Puss! I can see it in your eyes. You have not entirely deserted me, then?"

"Would I be trembling for your life if I did not love you, Booth? Go—I implore you! If father should hear us and—"

"He is tired. He will sleep on. But if you are so fearful, Little Puss, steal out to me for a few moments—I must learn all that passed after I was driven away—driven away like the lowest, vilest of all criminals."

His tones grew incautiously loud as he recalled his ignominious repulse, and the poor child trembled anew with terror. For an instant she felt almost sorry that she had ever met this lover of hers.

"If I could—but I fear he would awaken," she murmured, scarce knowing what words she uttered in her extremity.

"If he should, make some excuse for restlessness. Say that you are perishing for a breath of fresh air—anything, just so you can come out to me. If not—then I'll run the chances and we'll have our little talk out right here."

Hardly the tone or words of a true lover, but in her great fear and trembling, Little Puss failed to notice how stern, how hard were his tones. She feared lest Posey Curtis should be awakened, and in the first anger, carry out his vow.

"I dare not attempt it, Booth," she faltered, shrinking back, trying in vain to free her hands from his close grasp. "Do not ask it, I beg?"

"It is not so risky," he urged. "If he rouses up, he will be satisfied with your excuse. Even if he refuses to let you go out he will suspect nothing. And then, when he is asleep again, I will come back to say what I must say, here at your window."

Still the poor child hesitated, and still he persisted, until she was compelled to grant his wishes, though so strongly against her better judgment. And trembling like one about to commit a great crime, Little Puss made the venture.

Posey Curtis was lying on the floor, as was his custom—he had long been weaned from a regular bed—and beside him lay his faithful Winchester, ready to be caught up at a moment's warning.

The door was closed, but a ray of moonlight came in at the rear window, and slowly, tremblingly, she passed around the recumbent figure.

Her hand touched the barred door, to pause as a low moan broke from the lips of the sleeping man. Her heart leaped into her mouth as he stirred restlessly. She feared he was awaking, and in her terror she almost dropped to the floor; only the thought of her lover and his peril kept her from falling outright.

Only that one sound, only that one slight stirring. Then Posey Curtis slept on, little dreaming how his idolized child was yielding to the selfish urgings of the man whom he had denounced as unfit to associate with her.

Then—the deed was done!

At the threshold Booth Barrett met Little Puss, one arm slipping softly around her waist, his cheek touching hers as he bowed over her,

softly bidding her have no fear. And now that the first step was taken, Little Puss hurried willingly away from the door, still thinking mainly of his peril, still fearful for his life.

Away from the stone cabin and down the slope until the spring that supplied them with water was reached. Then Booth Barrett laughed softly as he said:

"You could not sleep, Little Puss. The excitement of to-day made you feverish, and you longed for a drink of fresh water. What more natural than to steal out to satisfy your craving, without alarming your father, worn and weary as he must be? See! have I not planned it neatly in case you should be missed before I can let you go?"

"That must be very soon—in one minute, dear Booth," was the agitated response. "I should not have come at all, only I feared for your life. And you ought not to have urged me so cruelly."

"Cruelly, Little Puss!"

"It was cruel," passionately sobbed the half-distracted girl. "If your love had been half as true and unselfish as mine—for you, you would have listened and obeyed when I implored you to go away. You would not have forced me to come out at this time of night, knowing that if father should awaken and discover what I have done, he would almost kill me in his just anger."

"Was it so cruel, darling?" with a mournful cadence that touched her poor heart as to angry response would have touched it.

"I do not mean—I only thought—"

Booth Barrett drew Little Puss to his side, bending his head and pressing a kiss upon her smooth brow. Then he released her, drawing back with folded arms, his voice low and sad.

"Go back to the house, Little Puss, after saying that you forgive me for my thoughtlessness. In the morning I will come and ask your father to say before me, what he told you after I went away to-day. Good-night, darling."

Little Puss burst into tears, bitter if silent. Instead of taking advantage of her freedom, she sunk down on a mossy rock by the spring, her head bowed, her face hidden in her hands.

"My darling!" passionately murmured Booth, as he sunk to his knees at her side, his arms gently encircling her waist, his warm lips touching her curls. "Forgive me once more. I hardly know what words I utter in my grief and wretchedness, but I swear that I never meant to make you weep. I only thought that would be the shortest way out."

Gently he caressed the girl, softly, tenderly he whispered to her, using all lover's arts until her grief gave way enough to permit her to talk coherently.

"I am foolishly weak, I know, Booth, but I have endured much since noon. Sometimes it seems as if I would go wild."

"And all because of me," he muttered, a dark frown wrinkling his brow. "And yet, as Heaven hears me, Little Puss, I would give my life to keep one grain of sorrow from your portion."

"Then go away, dear Booth, until a better time," she faintly urged. "You know my love is still yours. We are both young, and we can wait for brighter days. Go, I beg of you. What if father should waken and miss me! He would shoot you like a wild wolf."

"And with far less of peril to himself, Little Puss!" with a cold laugh and a darkening frown. "As your father, his life is sacred to me, no matter how black he may have painted my character to you. Nay," with a sudden access of tenderness as the maiden shrunk from him a trifle at his hardness, "I am not accusing him in a spirit of bitterness or revenge, darling. I know how jealous he is of you, and can readily understand that he would make the most of my little failings."

"He will learn to know you better ere long, Booth."

"I trust so," with a low laugh that was not all mirth. "What did he tell you, Little Puss? It is to learn this that brought me here at such a ghostly hour, though I had only the faintest hopes of gaining an interview with your sweet self."

"I could not sleep, and so—"

"And so kind Fate favored me, for which she is entitled to my heartfelt thanks! But you do not answer me, little girl; what did your father tell you about me? What reasons did he give for treating me so harshly? Surely he had reasons, right or wrong? It was not simply to degrade me in your eyes?"

"He was so angry, he said more than he meant, no doubt," she faltered, shrinking from the hard task set her.

"Hardly worse than he said to me, I reckon!" with another hard, disagreeable laugh. "He charged me with being a scoundrel in general, and bad he not been your father— But he was, and is. Let it go at that, then!"

"You need not answer my question, little girl, if it pains you. I can make a guess at what he said, and though I give him credit for believing all he told you, I swear to you by yonder stars—by my love for you, Little Puss, and more sacred oath mortal man never uttered—that I am as worthy your love as any mere man

can be. It is true that I have been a little wild and reckless in my time, but I have never sinned, have never committed a sin which I would be ashamed to let you judge. It is true that I have gambled, but not as a matter of business; simply to pass away an idle hour. I have drank, but never to excess. I could abstain wholly from both drinking and playing, without the least struggle to wean myself. This I swear to you, Little Puss!"

"I believe you, dear," with a soft smile through her tears. "I never doubted you, even when father told me you were so wicked. I felt that he was mistaken. I could not love one so lost to truth and honor."

"And you do love me, Little Puss? You love me enough to place a full and perfect trust in me? You will not yield to him, even though he forbids our love? You are mine—all mine!"

"All yours, Booth!" yielding to his ardent embrace.

"My angel!" he murmured, softly, yet passionately. "When he sees that it is useless to fight against it—when you are my wife—"

Little Puss shrunk back with a short cry, startled, yet hardly comprehending the purport of his last words. The ghost of a frown passed over his face, and he spoke quickly almost imperceptibly:

"You will go with me now, Little Puss, and when you are my wife, we will come back to beg your father's blessing. Come!"

"Booth! you do not mean it!" she gasped, with a sudden effort slipping from his grasp, seeming ready for flight.

"If you love me, Puss, prove it!" he muttered, passionately.

"I do love you—I love you better than any living being on earth, save my father! But I will never run away with you—how dare you ask it!" she panted, her face pale as death, her black eyes ablaze.

"And this is your love!"

"Listen, Booth," she said, more calmly, but with a dignity that he had never before seen her assume. "I love you. I will be your wife, if you ask it, when these clouds are cleared away. But until then—until father says I may, I will never wed you! I am all he has now. It would kill him were I to desert him so shamefully!"

"You think only of him!" moodily uttered the other.

"He is old, and loves me—loves me even more sacredly than I fear you do, Booth," was the grave response. "I swear to never wed another, but to remain true to you through good and evil report. I swear this; but do not ask me for more. Don't force me to think you love yourself more than you love me. Don't, I beg of you!"

Her voice grew unsteady as she uttered these words, and Barrett felt that all was not yet lost. She loved him—he knew that. And he knew that if he persevered she could hardly hold out against both that love and his pleadings.

But just at this juncture a sound came to them from the stone cabin. Posey Curtis had awakened, and noticing the door ajar, which he had fastened so carefully on lying down to sleep, had sprung to Little Puss's chamber door, only to discover her absence.

A wild, agonized cry broke from his lips, as he turned and flung wide the door, glaring about him, half-blinded by the moonlight coming after the interior gloom.

"Puss! Little Puss! whar be ye? What hes happened?" he cried, his voice harsh and strained from the awful fear which had assailed him, as that hasty glance showed him the unruffled bed in his daughter's chamber. "Speak my child! Whar be ye?"

"Go—go if you love me!" gasped Little Puss, springing back in terror as Booth Barrett stepped closer to her under the bushes. "If he sees you here, he will kill you! And kill me, thinking me faithless! Go, I beg of you!"

"Little Puss, I say!" cried the half-distracted father. "God of heaven! hes she run off with that hell-hound?"

"Coming, father!" cried the maiden, springing out into the moonlight and running up the slope. "I could not sleep—I felt feverish, and my throat was so parched, I wanted a drink of fresh water," she hurriedly added, scarce knowing what she said in her dread lest Posey discover the truth. "I feel better now!"

"An' so do I, Little Puss," he muttered, clasping her to his bosom with passionate fervor. "I hed a horrible dream! But it ain't true! You wouldn't run away from pore old daddy!"

CHAPTER XV.

WITH UNMASKED FACES.

If the expected shot did not follow The Man of Silk through the door of Darius Aymer's chamber, it was not altogether the fault of the little woman. She snatched up one of the pistols which, in a foolishly sentimental moment, she had suffered to slip from her grasp, and her dainty forefinger was crooking around the trigger when a trembling hand closed over the muzzle and bore it to one side.

"Spare him, Adine," huskily muttered the father. "Give him one more chance—one more

chance. He will yield—he cannot see his poor, white-haired father suffer such torments, without—without—

His voice choked and his head sunk upon the table. That terrible ordeal was more than he could bear in his present weak state.

Adine yielded, perhaps more because she felt how improbable it was that a blind shot through that barrier would strike down her mocking enemy, than through the mercy her husband besought her to show. She dropped her weapon, and bent her care to his restoration, acting promptly and composedly, like one who had long since grown familiar with such duties.

A touching picture it would have made to an onlooker who was ignorant of their actual relationship. A helpless father and a loving daughter. Or the relationship might have been one degree more remote, to contrast her youth, her daintily-blooming health, with his white hairs, bowed and trembling figure, husky voice and palsied tongue.

"He was hard—hard and bitter," muttered the father, his love not yet wholly extinguished, his hope still faintly flickering. "But he suffered so much in the days when that scheming woman held me under her spells. I was so harsh and merciless to him then. I drove him out into the cold and cruel world, a homeless wanderer, to live or die, to fight his way without a dollar to help him. Of course he would feel hard against us, remembering all this. But it will not last—it will not last. He was proud and high-spirited, but Robert was loving and easy to forgive in those days. He'll remember—he'll soften as he thinks over what I've said—he'll come back in the morning to say that he'll make amends. Robert will come, Adine. I know that—my God! if I did not know it, I would wish to die before the dawn of another day," he added, with a sobbing, choking gasp.

Sentence by sentence these words fell from his lips while Adine was caring for him. Not in connected order as they find record here, but fitfully, irregularly, broken by her soft murmuring, by his own weakness of body and mind.

With a patience rare as it was skillful and tender, Adine Aymer persisted until the old man was stowed away in bed, much more composed and hopeful than would have been deemed possible to any one who did not know how severely his brain had suffered of late days. And then, promising not to be long absent, she put out the light and left the chamber, gliding silently, rapidly along the narrow corridor which separated the two rows of chambers, pausing at the further end to rap in a peculiar fashion upon the closed door.

"Is it you, little girl?" came a guarded whisper through the keyhole, after a brief spell of impatient waiting on her part.

"Open, Bush," was her impatient response.

The door opened, and she quickly slipped through the aperture the instant it was wide enough to permit her passage.

"Close and bar, Bush. Drop your handkerchief over the knob. There may be spies about this cursed hole," she grated, in tones and looks vastly different from the dainty, shrinking lady we have so far seen.

Clark obeyed her, then turned and gained her side as she sunk down on the edge of the bed, his eyes flashing, his dark face full of poorly-hidden uneasiness as he asked:

"What is it, girl? How did it come out? Good or bad?"

"You tell," with a short, metallic laugh, deep wrinkles coming to mar the smoothness of her fair brow.

"I saw him come out of the room, and something in his actions made me think he expected a shot, or some such matter. How was it?" persisted Bush Clark, a ring of impatience in his voice.

"If you had only lent him one," grated Adine, shaking her tightly-clinched hands in the direction of the corridor. "And yet," with an abrupt transition which told how strongly she had been tried during the past two hours, "I do not know. Perhaps there's more money in letting him run to the full length of the rope."

"You mean that devil—The Man of Silk, as they call him?"

"Do you know, Bush, I begin to believe that, after all, we have been barking on the wrong trail from the very first."

"You mean?" the dark-faced man hesitated.

"That it may have been nothing but the truth Darius Aymer told us at the time. I begin to believe that he never had a finger in the robbery, after all."

"None?" with an ugly emphasis. "Are you going crazy, girl?"

"I set him down as a cunning rascal from the very start," Adine muttered, almost as much to herself as for the benefit of her present companion. "I felt that he was playing a bold yet crafty game for a mighty big stake. If I hadn't, would I have acted the part I did at the trial and before it?"

"Or after, why don't you add?" snapped Bush Clark, with an ugly show of teeth. "That has been by far the hardest and most disagreeable part of the job, I fancy."

"I'm not so certain of that, Bush," and the face of the little woman perceptibly softened in

unison with her voice. "At first it was tiresome enough, I admit, but then—it is something to be loved as wholly as I am loved by that poor old man. It is no slight thing to feel that to one person in the world at least, I am pure and innocent, more like an angel to be revered and worshiped, than a woman to be cursed and beaten when the fit strikes one. You know how that goes, old boy," with a short, disagreeable laugh at the end.

Bush Clark rolled up his eyes in mock horror.

"Ye gods and little fishes! Coney Kate sighing for septuagenarian worship, and wanting to be an angel! Somebody knock me down with a feather before I faint! Oh—my!"

"Don't try a game you never can learn, Bush," with a low, reckless laugh in sharp contrast to her last mood. "You can handle a sandbag much better than a rapier; you know better how to curse and bluster than to utter sarcastic compliments. Stick to your line, and you'll get fewer trips and tumbles, old boy!"

"And you, Kate?" with a half-threatening echo in his voice. "You are not going to jump the track at this late stage of the game?"

"Not any, old fellow. I went in to win, and I'll stay with you till the last card is played. But it's beginning to look mighty bilious, now you hear my gentle voice whisper! Mighty bilious, old pard!"

If Darius Aymer could have heard her utter those words! If he could have gazed into the face of the little woman—angel as he so often called her—he would hardly have recognized her as his gentle, loving, babyish little wife!

Indeed, she had been playing a part—a part that reached back for nearly three years: back beyond the robbery of the Merchants' Bank of Chicago. And never a woman in all the world who could have played such a role more successfully, up to the hour when she first met The Man of Silk at the stage robbery.

Coney Kate! A name well known among the criminals of the Eastern cities, although the police had never fairly spotted the dainty little dealer in counterfeit money, and her fair face had not as yet been added to the Rogues' Gallery.

Trouble threatening in New York, where the gang with which she was connected had been operating pretty extensively, Coney Kate and the man who was now her companion shook the dust of the Metropolis from their feet and alighted in Chicago. They lived in modest retirement, until an accident threw the little woman in contact with Darius Aymer.

It was nothing more than a fatherly—grandfatherly might be even better—interest the cashier took in the fairy-like stranger at first, and there it would have ended, only for the position he held.

That evening Coney Kate happened to mention the chance encounter to her companion, who instantly recognized the cashier from her description. From that chance mention grew much that has been recorded in these columns.

Bush Clark, by which name we now know him, was a criminal born and bred, but he lacked the cool courage and fearlessness which should go with the other qualities he possessed, and without which no man can long succeed in crime. He knew that he was already "spotted" by more than one detective, although as yet he had kept his sins well cloaked. He knew that in time he must be caught in the act if he continued in active operation, and thus he longed for a chance to make a fortune at a single stroke; then he would "retire."

He fancied he saw his longed-for opportunity in this meeting with Darius Aymer, and Coney Kate was quite willing to fall in with his plan as soon as he divulged it.

The cashier was to be trapped, and if he could not be used as a willing tool, he was to be betrayed, drugged if need be, and then left to suffer the penalty rightfully due them. All but the minor details were arranged when the blow fell—dealt by another hand.

It was true that Bush Clark discovered Darius Aymer, bound and gagged, just as the robbers had left him, but he felt that this was only a part of the cunning game which the cashier had elected to play. Even while warning Aymer of the peril he ran, Clark felt that the cashier was by far the guiltiest man in that robbery.

It was difficult to reconcile this opinion with the facts that soon came out; to understand why the keys should still be missing, instead of having been restored to his keeping after their aid was utilized; but new hands often make bungling work, and this must be another instance of that well-known fact.

Believing that Darius Aymer would eventually come in for at least an equal share of the plunder, it was easy enough for Bush Clark to induce Coney Kate—as Adine Elmer—to play the pathetic heroine who so stirred the court with her great self-sacrifice, rather than permit an innocent man to suffer.

It was a double stroke, and both proved complete successes. Darius Aymer was cleared by her evidence, and feeling that the poor little woman had blasted her character for life by her heroic lie, the old man begged her to marry him, and thus silence the tongues of scandal as far as possible.

It may be that he was led into this mad act, for Adine Elmer knew that only by some such tie could she hope to ever secure the vast sum stolen from the Merchants' Bank. If so, the snare was daintily hidden, and only after long persuasion did the weeping girl yield to the grateful man. And then, as his wife, Adine began the game in earnest.

Only to suffer defeat thus far. Not one single clew had she gained to the stolen treasure, until this night. Up to the moment of their meeting with The Man of Silk, and the recognition of him by Darius Aymer, all her cunning arts, all her specious hints, availed nothing. She obstinately refused to regard him as an innocent man. She could not have made such a miserable mistake.

She had long since learned that there was a skeleton in her husband's closet, though only from his restless mutterings in his sleep. She knew that he had a son, but living or dead, she could only surmise. When she asked him of the past, Darius Aymer either answered evasively, or not at all.

She managed to discover the picture of Robert Aymer, taken just before his flight from home, years before, and when Darius Aymer began that apparently aimless wandering through the mining regions, she carried the picture with her. She more than half-believed this unnamed son was connected with the robbery, but only as an agent, not as principal.

Both she and her "brother" were too shrewd. They credited the old man with too great a portion of their own craft, and refused to recognize the simple truth, even when it stared them in the face, every day for nearly three years.

More than a score of times had Bush Clark grown hotly impatient at the long delay, and urged his confederate to openly tax her husband with the robbery, and force him to tell where the treasure was hidden. If not through simple argument, then they must use harsher means. They had worked long and faithfully for the prize, and it was high time they began to enjoy the fruits of their labors.

But Adine Aymer steadily counseled patience. She felt that they were being shadowed wherever they went. Although she could bring no proof positive of her suspicions, she felt that the great robbery had not yet been dropped by the hounds of the law. And so the time passed on without any positive action being taken.

As he listened, Bush Clark frowned darkly. Ever suspicious, he ended by beginning to suspect this ally of his.

"For both of us—or only for me, Kate?" he slowly demanded.

"What do you mean by that?" with widely-opened eyes. "We are in the same boat. What comes to one, comes to both, don't it?"

"That was the bargain, but—"

Adine leaned forward and gazed steadily into his dark eyes, her own filling with a strangely mixed light. Her tones were low and earnest as she spoke again:

"You are not beginning to doubt me, Horace, after all I have done at your bidding?"

"You boasted just now that you rather liked it!" with a scowl.

"Better for me if I could!" with sudden passion. "Better for me if I was half-way deserving of the love he lavishes on me. But I am not, as no man knows better than you, Horace Miller. While he worships me—the poor old fool!" with a touch of pitying sadness coming into her voice, the hard lines on her face growing softer. "While he worships me as little short of an angel, I am deceiving him every day, every hour of the day. For you, Horace! All for you, and you know it."

"Well, you must admit it's mighty little love the old idiot shows me," was the snapping retort. "He treats me like a dog—only fit to fetch and carry. And you, Kate—"

"Have a still harder part to play, dear Horace," as she dropped at his feet and leaned her head against his side, with a wearied, heart-sick air. "But is it not worth it?" with another sudden change, springing to her feet, her hands clinched, her face all aglow. "Think of the money—think of our life when the prize is fairly won!"

"Will it ever be won? Three years, and not one step nearer the end than at first. It looks mighty like a sell, Kate!"

"There you're 'way off, Horace!" laughed the little woman, sinking into her former position on the edge of the narrow bed. "We're so near the end that I can catch a glimmer of the yellow stakes, Horace!"

"What do you mean? What have you discovered since we last met?"

It was his turn to move forward and grasp her hands, gazing breathlessly into her smiling face; smiling then, only to turn grave and steady a moment later.

"Enough to feel sure that we've been barking on the wrong track from the very first, Horace! Enough to convince me that Darius Aymer no more had a hand in robbing that bank than you or I," she slowly replied.

"Then who did get the plunder?"

"His son, Robert Aymer!"

"You don't mean it, Kate!"

"It is Gospel truth—if you can understand

"that," with a fleeting smile at the idea the term brought before her mind.

"Then why didn't he blow the gaff? Because he was in cahoots with the boy, of course," answering his own question before Adine could do so. "And you think that this devil—this Felix Bland as he calls himself now—is that son?"

"I know it!" nodding her head positively. "You shall judge for yourself," she added, rapidly but clearly sketching all that transpired in the chamber further along the narrow corridor.

In silence Bush Clark listened, gnawing his thumbnail, his brow corrugated, his black eyes filled with a reddish glow. He seemed to be weighing her every word as she spoke, and when her narrative came to an end he spoke deliberately:

"It does begin to have that look, Kate, I must confess. I'm sorry, too, for that man is a very different fellow to handle from old Aymer! He's mighty bad medicine, now I tell you!"

"You know something about him, then? You have met him before this day, Horace?" slowly asked the little woman.

"And you, Kate?" swiftly demanded her accomplice. "Somehow I fancied he and you were not total strangers when you met to-day!"

"If we ever met, it must have been long ago, Horace," was the cold response, a shade coming into her eyes at his evident suspicion. "There is something strangely familiar about his eyes, but I have tried in vain to place him. I begin to believe it is only his strong resemblance to this picture," tapping her bosom with one hand. "I have looked at it so often, have studied it so carefully, ever since I first began to suspect who it was Aymer wished to find."

Bush Clark shrugged his shoulders slightly.

"Wish I could banish my fears as readily! I know him as an infernally dangerous customer: as one who was once, if he is not now, acting as a bloodhound of the law! The narrowest escape of my life came through that same demon!"

"You owe him a grudge, then?"

"One that I'll pay with interest, if ever chance offers!"

"Then you've got a double incentive to work swift and sure, for I know that The Man of Silk is none other than Robert Aymer, the son of the old man, and the real robber of the Merchant's Bank! If we can get him foul, tight pinching will bring out the whole truth. He may be the demon you call him, but under the screw he'll prove no more than a common man. He'll disgorge, rather than suffer on as we can and will make him suffer. Don't you see?"

"What you mean, but not how it is to be brought about," dubiously.

"This is not your first trip to the mines, Horace? I thought so," with a nod and a laugh as his face answered her question. "It may take time, but surely you can discover some of your old acquaintances in whom you can trust. If not, money will buy tools anywhere; and money we have in plenty, thanks to The Man of Silk!" with another light laugh.

"Those rascals would have found it, cunningly though you concealed the boodle—yes!" laughed the man. "We owe him thanks for so much, anyway!"

"And the money he saved shall be his ruin, Horace. You can do it. You must do it!" with sudden emphasis. "We've spent too much time to lose the prize now! He has it, or can tell us where to find it. Do your work well, and we'll go back to the old life, forgetting all these miserable years. It is worth it, Horace?"

"Not the old life, but the old relation, you mean? Yes—for that I'd trap a dozen fellows worse than this demon of silk!" with vicious energy.

"He said something about that big mate of his, too. Said he was a detective, and on the trail of the real robber, Horace. Do you think he was lying, or telling the truth? Will we have to arrange for him, also?"

"He talked straight there, anyway," growled the man, frowning darkly. "That big fellow is a bloodhound, sure enough! I knew him when we first met, and I more than half believe he knew me as well."

"He has no hold over you?" with sharp anxiety.

"None that I know of. I'd be glad to see him, if it was only the thief we wanted. He'd catch hold with a grip of steel at the first hint; but there's the money! I'll set some one to keeping an eye out for the fellow, and if he threatens trouble, his trail will end right here in Posey's Pocket!"

"Pick your shadow carefully, then, for unless my eyes deceive me more than they usually do, it will take steel muscles to handle that big fellow, but though he seemed when at the stage-halting. He's only a baby in name, or I miss my guess!"

"I know what he is, and will act accordingly. And, do you know, Kate, we're mighty lucky in making this discovery right now and here!"

"What do you mean? More than your words would indicate on the face of them, I know! What have you found out?"

"The very men who will help us in this job, without asking one dollar for pay, or a single question as to our motives!" was the rapid response. "They'll do it for revenge. To get even with the men who killed one of their mates, and crippled their captain!"

Adine Aymer gazed into his exultant face with glowing eyes.

"Good for our side, Horace! The game is won before it is fairly begun! Set your new allies at work. Put them on the trail without the loss of a minute more than you can avoid. Tell them to take The Man of Silk to a secure spot, and then notify us. And more—we must take Darius Aymer to the same spot! The robbery lies between those two men, and by judicious pinching we'll soon get at the bottom facts!"

CHAPTER XVI.

PRESCRIBING FOR AN ENEMY.

"THOUSAND curses blister them! will they never come? Have they gone to sleep on the way? Drunk or sober, I said bring him here."

At least a portion of the curses invoked were particularized by the same angry lips, as the wounded road-agent strode feverishly to and fro in the dim light, nursing the hand that had been shattered by the bullet of Felix Bland, the little man in gray. And had one-half of that portion actually come to pass, those laggards would have cast the martyrs of old far, far into the shade.

To and fro, his bandaged right hand clasped tenderly in his uncrippled member and held before him in such a manner as to lessen the flow of blood to the injured parts as much as possible. To and fro, the pain being too great for quiet waiting, now cursing the delay in his messengers, then emptying the vials of his wrath on the head of the man whose snap-shot left him a cripple for life.

The sable mask was gone, now, and the oil lamp which burned on the rude slab table cast a dim light through its smoky chimney upon the face and form of the road-agent, as well as his surroundings.

These were anything but gorgeous; only the slab table by way of furniture; walls, ceiling and floor of rough, uneven rock; one of the countless dens, rather than caverns, with which the mountain ranges are honeycombed.

Not a bad-looking fellow; this road-agent, when his face was for a few seconds at a time free from pain and savage rage. Not handsome, in the general acceptance of the word. Too hard and rugged a face for that. But a face that would "pass in a crowd." A trim, muscular figure, with quick, lithe movements.

As soon as it was certain pursuit was not being made, after their unexpected defeat at the stage-halting, the chief halted and permitted his hand to be dressed temporarily, the flow of blood being so profuse as to cause him no little uneasiness for the result, unless some such precaution was taken. As yet, he did not suffer much with the injury. He knew the member was badly shattered, but it was so benumbed by the shock, that several hours passed by before he really began to feel the wound.

Before that time he had sent a number of his men, without their masks and in a purely unofficial manner, to Posey's Pocket for the express purpose of bringing back with them one "Doc" Sanderson, who had gained a widespread reputation among the miners as "mighty good medicine" to take after a free fight or an accident—provided he was sober enough to know what his hands were doing.

"Drunk or sober, I told them," snarled the road-agent, his face growing white with a fresh spasm of pain. "In a hurry, too. The curs! Do they think I'm to be slighted, just because my term is near an end? Do they—well, what is it?" he sharply demanded, as he wheeled to confront a man who paused doubtfully just at the edge of light. "Have they come?"

"They've got back, boss; but—" stammered the fellow, shrinking very much as though he felt like taking to his heels instantaneously.

"No—without what they went for?" grated the chief, fiercely. "Not without bringing him back with them? If they have—"

"They've fetched him, but—it ain't the right one!"

For a single breath the road-agent stood silent, motionless, staring at the speaker, as though trying to solve the riddle. It may have been this very doubt, or the sudden hope of relief itself, that caused his wound to cease pinching him, but the lull came most opportunely for the reluctant messenger. Instead of curses, the chief laughed shortly as he seated himself on one of the rocks beside the table.

"Send them in here, with whoever they brought. Lively!"

"It ain't so mighty bad as I thought, but durned ef I'm comin' back to introduce 'em—not any!" muttered the envoy, scuttling away through the gloom to enter another and larger chamber. "You're to show up, he says, mates, an' in a hurry, too! Shake, afore you fade out o' me sight ag'in, pard!" with a lugubrious sigh.

"Tain't so bad as all that, Ricketts?" mutter-

ed the man he addressed, his weather-beaten countenance turning fairly green as he spoke.

"Mebbe it mought be wuss, but durned ef I kin see jest how! Ef it was me—which love nur money couldn't hire me to be it—I'd jest shove the critter in fu'st, an' let him take off the cuss, like!"

"Free my hands, and I'll beard the monster for you, gentlemen," the captive uttered in a low, smooth tone. "Haven't the ghost of an idea what it is, or what it's like; but I'm willing to do almost anything to accommodate a friend, and you've treated me so delightfully sweet—"

"Hold your clapper, or we'll hold it for you!" growled the other.

"Use a pair of tongs, then, or you'll be mighty apt to get your fingers nipped in the trying," laughed the prisoner. "As for your high and mighty monster, I'll throw him a sop in the shape of a man! You can follow when you think he's glutted his frenzy on yours truly!"

With a swift stride he passed from the chamber into the narrow passage, before a hand could be lifted to prevent his action. And it was his face and figure—the face and figure of Felix Bland, The Man of Silk—that the road-agent chief looked upon first.

For a few moments in open-jawed amazement. Then, as recognition flashed upon his brain, a hoarse, choking growl of malignant rage rose in his throat as he snatched a revolver from his belt with his sound hand, cocking and throwing it up to a level.

"You—you bloodhound!"

"That's the worst I ever saw!" scornfully uttered The Man of Silk, as he cocked his head a little on one side in criticism. "Can't you do better than that, stranger? Don't grip so tight; try and believe your arm isn't a pump-handle; let your wrist come up limber, with a touch of grace to it, can't you? If not—get down and take a rest on the edge of the table. I'd rather like to be a patriarch, than be shot in such a slovenly manner—I would, for a blushing fact!"

A little forced, perhaps, but probably nothing less would have checked that threatened shot as the road-agent recognized the man to whose skill he owed his crippled hand. Even as it was, the life of the little man in gray hung by a thread for a brief space. Had he flinched an atom—had he uttered a word in pleading or expostulation—a bullet would have sped through his brain before the words could have cooled on his lips.

Instead, he moved forward, still with that smile of contemptuous, almost pitying criticism on his face.

"You are decidedly rusty, my friend, for a man who lives by the pistol. Why don't you practice more—or else stick to your right hand? Eh? had an accident, have you?" as though for the first time noticing the bloody bandage.

"How did that happen?"

From the gloom behind The Man of Silk came muttered exclamations of wonder and surprise at his sublime impudence, and a soft laugh parted his lips as he added:

"That reminds me, old fellow: your heelers seemed to fear you were ready with sharpened tushes to snap their heads off for fetching the wrong customer, and I volunteered to come on ahead to take the curse off. If you must shoot, let me shut my eyes first; I'd die of mortification if I had to look at myself being sent over the range in such an inartistic fashion!"

"Come forward, you skulking dogs!" grated the chief, his black eyes flashing redly, but the revolver dropping from his hand to lie upon the table. "Sock Mickett, I say!"

"Here, boss!" uttered the fellow, striding forward with dogged mien.

"I sent you after Doc Sanderson; you have brought him, of course?" coldly demanded the chief, showing his teeth viciously.

"I could 'a sworn it, ontel we fetched that durned critter into the light!" with a savage side glance at Felix Bland.

"I sent for Doc Sanderson, to dress my hand. Instead, you bring me the fellow who sent a bullet through it. How does this happen?"

"This way. We looked fer Doc, but they told us he was gone to his room at the tavern. We went thar, an' jest as we did, a man come outdoors, an' we tuck him fer Doc. We didn't ketch a fa'r sight at his face, but ef you'll bear that in mind, an' look at his shape an' gin'ral make-up, boss, mebbe you'll see it wasn't sech a turrible blunder, after all! They're like as two peas in one pod!"

"Fine-looking fellow, that Doc Sanderson, then; must remember to ask for him, when I go back to Posey's Pocket," murmured Felix Bland.

The chief uttered a short, hard laugh.

"When you go back! Look at that, curse you!" shaking his bloody-banded hand before his face with savage vehemence. "Look at that, and then say how much chance there is of your ever seeing Posey's Pocket again! Crippled—crippled for life! And by your hand!"

"Then you're the gentleman I had to rap over the knuckles to-day, are you?" exclaimed The Man of Silk, his brows arching slightly. "Really I didn't recognize you until this mo-

ment. It does make a difference, don't it, with or without a mask?"

"Crippled—but you'll never live to laugh over it, curse you!" with a half-stifled groan of pain as a sharp twinge shot through the injured member. "I'll take it out of your hide as man was never avenged before! I'll torture you until you pray for death as the sweetest boon fortune can give you! I'll—"

"Send a fever into that wound such as may be difficult to cool, unless you moderate your passions, my dear fellow," gravely uttered Felix Bland, drawing a little closer, looking at the injured member with an eye that might almost be called professional. "Of course it makes little difference to me, seeing you have my future all mapped out, but if I might advise—shall I?"

"What are you driving at?" growled the outlaw, sullenly.

Like the rest of the gang, who were looking on and listening, he was beginning to be disagreeably impressed by this marvelous nerve. Could it be that there was a trap closing upon them? Could it be that this bound man really felt that he held the key to the situation?

If not, would he be so infernally cool in the very face of death?

"Nothing more mysterious than giving you a bit of friendly advice as amends for rapping your knuckles so harshly," was the cool reply. "You're going the surest way to lose your hand, if not arm. You're heating up your blood by storming at me, and if you don't look a little out I'll have company across the divide."

"Once more, what are you trying to get at?"

"That the sooner you place yourself under the care of a doctor or surgeon, if one is to be found in this wooden country, the better your chances for coming off without losing hand and arm, if not life. Send your fellows back to Posey's Pocket to bring the simon pure Doc. Or, if you doubt them after the big mistake they have made, go yourself."

"And you think this will give you a reprieve? Bah!" with a hard, venomous laugh, "that is too gauzy!"

"All right, if you think so," was the careless retort. "I can stand it as long as you, I dare say. I only thought that if I was to suffer until your hand got well, it'd save time and trouble if you took the wisest and safest course."

With a glance about him The Man of Silk selected a stone not far from the table at which the wounded road-agent still sat and quietly seated himself, unobtrusively yet keenly watching the face of the man on the other side of the table.

It was pale and pain-marked. Drops of sweat stood over his temples, and he clasped his wounded hand with his left fingers, plainly suffering no slight amount of agony.

"It's worse than I thought, but it will heal all right enough, even without surgical aid," he muttered, with a scowl at Felix Bland. "If those stupid rascals had not made such an infernal blunder—"

"You would not have the exquisite pleasure of my company."

"I'm glad they did mistake you for Doc!" with vicious energy. "I will drown the pain by torturing you! I'll forget my injury in listening to your groans and pleadings for mercy!"

"I'll make 'em loud and pathetic, even if I have to pretend, for your especial accommodation," coolly retorted The Man of Silk. "I'm one of the most accommodating fellows you ever met in a year's journey, if I do say so myself. And then—I owe you that much," with another glance at the bandaged hand.

"More than you can ever pay off, curse you!"

"Not more than I can, but more than you will probably permit, you mean," pointedly uttered the prisoner.

"Another of your crazy enigmas?" snarled the road-agent.

"The undiluted truth, dear sir," with a bland smile. "I'm not the fellow you sent for, nor do I tote around a diploma authorizing me to cut and carve, stuff and deplete my fellow-citizens; but, for all that, I could check that—but what's the use talking?"

"You could check what?" demanded the wounded outlaw.

"Set my hands free, and let me feel of your pulse, then—"

"You would hunt for it in my throat—I see it in your eyes!" fiercely laughed the road-agent. "Bah! do you think I am such an idiot? Do you think you can cheat me into giving you a sharp and speedy death in place of the torture I've sworn to inflict? You don't know me."

"Nor you me," was the cold response. "I tell you I am sorry for the pain you are undergoing, since it comes of my work. I am not sorry for firing the shot, mind you. That was done to save the life of a lady whom you was threatening with death. I would fire it again, without stopping for a second thought; but I would send it through your brain instead."

"Better there than through my good right hand," with a half-stifled groan.

"Just my opinion," with a grave nod. "And that is why I advised you as I have. I would

not give your death, under those circumstances, a second thought; but I can feel for you as it now stands. I know that you will never have a good hand again—I know what wicked work a Winchester can do, you see. And I know that you will fare still worse, unless you use more precaution."

"You would even patch me up if I permitted, no doubt?" sneered the injured man, incredulously.

"You wouldn't believe me were I to say so, on oath."

"No more than you mean what you only dare insinuate."

"Ask those fellows what they found on my person when they went through my garments, out yonder," coldly uttered The Man of Silk. "Only after they discovered their mistake in identity," with a slight smile as his keen eyes noted the black frown that swept across the face of the road-agent chief. "Had I been the redoubtable Doc Sanderson, my little personalities would have been sacred, no doubt."

"We jest thought mebbe it'd be best to s'arch him fer concealed weapons, boss," muttered Sock Mickett, fidgeting uneasily.

Plainly this burly ruffian, as well as his fellows, stood in wholesome awe of his chief. The Man of Silk reached this conclusion, and the swift gleam that entered and fled from his eyes told how far from unpleasant that discovery was.

"No matter what your thoughts were; you know you were violating one of our strictest rules in daring to search a prisoner without my orders, without my presence," sternly uttered the chief. "Because I'm crippled is no excuse for your conduct."

"We 'lowed to 'count fer everythin' when we got a chance."

"That chance comes right now! Place every article you took from the prisoner on the table before me. And you," with a glance toward The Man of Silk, "will please inform me if anything, no matter how small or insignificant, is omitted or forgotten."

Sock Mickett and his mates came forward and obeyed. Besides some money and the weapons taken from their captive, there was a small case of morocco leather, flat and easy to carry in an inner pocket. On this the eye of the captive rested with a quick gleam, and then, as the men fell back again, he spoke quietly:

"All accounted for, captain, as far as my memory goes. Certainly there is nothing of importance missing."

"Very well. You can fall back, men," turning to the outlaws, with cold tones. "I'll settle with you hereafter."

"Don't bear down a single ounce on my account, I beg of you," uttered The Man of Silk, with a faint smile. "What's the use of being a Knight of Free-fingers, if those fingers are not permitted to stick to the little trifles they may find in an odd pocket? One might as well be a lawyer!"

"I'll settle with them. Just now, I want to settle with you. What was your object in asking for these things?" demanded the chief, his tones cold and unrestrained, but with a faint undercurrent of curiosity lying beneath.

"Since my hands are otherwise occupied, may I trouble you to open that little pocket-case?" blandly uttered The Man of Silk.

The road-agent quickly complied, revealing half a dozen small bottles, some containing powder, others filled with liquid. Just such a case and just such bottles as a disciple of homeopathy might carry.

"What next?" demanded the road-agent, with a frown of discontent.

He had expected something entirely different from this, as his swift alteration of countenance testified.

"A little honest talk with you, first. I chipped into your little game to-day simply because I saw a lady in trouble, not because I held any particular grudge against you or your sort. If I had held that grudge, you would have dropped with a bullet through your brain, and there would have been more of your fellows to keep you company."

"One stopped behind, curse you!"

"That was not my work, but lies at the door of Baby John Barcus. It comes in his line, seeing he is a detective by profession."

"And you his partner!"

"For the day and trip, not one foot further," was the prompt reply. "But let that go for the present. I merely say this much to explain why I am anxious to make terms with you."

"The reason is simple, surely!" with a hard, vicious laugh. "You don't fancy the little picture I drew for you a bit ago?"

"If you only knew it, my dear fellow, you are trying your level best to bite your own nose off. If I didn't know you are half-mad with pain, I'd shut clam and let you hoe your own row. As it is—listen:

"One of those little bottles, emptied into water, the water used to keep your bandages wet, will still all pain like magic; will drive out the growing fever, and permit your wound to heal as it will never heal while you continue to feed the fever with your mad fury as you are doing now."

"Which bottle?" sullenly, suspiciously demanded the outlaw.

"Set my hands at liberty, and I'll show you. More—I'll promise you a surprise such as you little dream of now!"

The road-agent laughed shortly, sneeringly, as he said:

"Not a doubt of it, my crafty Man of Silk! You're too tough a fellow to handle, for that! You'd have your fingers at my throat the—"

"You fool!" with a sharp contempt. "If you still doubt, make the trial yourself. Empty the center bottle in water and wet your hurt."

For a brief space the outlaw hesitated, still doubting. But as a fresh twinge shot through his hand, he growled:

"It can't well be worse—I'll try it, anyhow!"

Anticipating this decision, Sock Mickett had water ready that instant, and in another minute the wounded hand was being wet with the mixture. Scarcely had the water touched the torn flesh, than a low exclamation broke from the lips of the injured man.

"Well, did I lie to you?" coldly asked The Man of Silk.

"Is it like magic! Every particle of pain is gone! Only for my eyes, I could almost take oath I hadn't been hurt at all!" cried the road-agent, springing to his feet with a face glowing brightly.

"Don't play the fool on the opposite tack, then," was the laughing retort. "Sit down—unless you would rather set your benefactor at liberty!"

"Not yet—don't be in such a hurry, old fellow," with a hard, ugly laugh as he returned to his seat. "The pain is gone, but it may come back. And there is the crippled hand still! I hardly think I'll set you free, just yet!"

"As I hardly expected you would, I am not so badly disappointed," quietly said Felix, with a peculiar smile, as he watched the outlaw renew the medicine. "If you can believe me, I don't think you need waste any more of that precious stuff. It has done its work, already!"

A strange, bewildered light was creeping into the eyes of the outlaw. His flushed face was turning pale—not white, but with a sickly greenish tinge. His lips tightened. He half started from his seat, only to drop back again, clutching at his wounded hand with his sound one.

"What is the matter? What does this mean? The pain is coming back again—no! it is ten thousand times worse! It is different! What does it mean? What trick have you played on me, you demon?"

The Man of Silk rose and peered down at the little pocket-case, then drew his figure rigidly erect, looking at the sufferer with eyes that glowed like balls of living fire, his voice hard and merciless:

"That you took the wrong bottle, my dear fellow! That you've bathed your hand in deadly poison!"

CHAPTER XVII.

DRIVING A HARD BARGAIN.

THOSE terrible words seemed to stupefy the wounded outlaw for a few moments, during which he stared with drooping jaw and wild eyes at the daring being who thus pronounced his doom. And during that brief space he forgot the maddening pain which thrilled through his crippled right hand.

"You lie!" he gasped, his words hardly articulate. "You think to scare me into setting you free, by—ha! ha! ha! it is a rare joke! I fooled even you! My hand—"

He faltered, grating his teeth savagely, gripping the injured member so tightly with his left hand that the blood was started to flowing afresh. His face turned fairly purple, but all in vain. A groan that was almost a scream broke through his foam-tinged lips.

"You played with a tiger, and complain because you feel his claws!" mockingly laughed The Man of Silk, half-turning, so as to bring all of the band beneath his range of vision. "You swore to torture me until I prayed for death—and even while the words were fresh on your lips, death comes to you! Death beside which your fiercest tortures are as nothing! Death—unless you beg for aid from the hand you have refused to set at liberty!"

"Down him, boys!" savagely grated Sock Mickett. "We'll skin him alive an' rub him over with the durned pizen! Come—Ugh!"

He plunged forward to grasp the bound man, but he was met nearly half-way by Felix Bland. A deer-like leap into the air, and both heels were dashed full into the face of the burly ruffian, hurling him in a bleeding, senseless mass across the chamber. Cat-like, The Man of Silk alighted safely upon his feet, his brown eyes seeming to emit electric sparks, his voice hard and menacing:

"Call off your hounds, chief, unless you surely wish to seal your fate. They've got to kill me before they hamper me any further than I am now, and if I go under, the knowledge of the antidote to that poison perishes with me! Choose—and in a mighty hurry!"

The road-agent was half-distracted with agony, but he managed to understand these words, and motioned his men back.

"Back! He must tell—oh! this is worse than hell!"

"A simple foretaste, my dear fellow," laughed The Man of Silk, as he saw the outlaws fall back, still obedient to their leader. "Nothing to what will come as the poison begins to eat its way toward your heart. Only a priming to what it will be when it begins to creep and crawl through each vein, slowly but surely turning all to corruption; when you feel and see yourself—"

"Mercy, you demon!" gasped the suffering wretch, forgetting his threats, forgetting his power of life or death over this mocking prisoner. "Save me! Give me something to kill this horrible pain, before it drives me mad! For the love of—"

"Nothing while I am kept bound like a thief," was the cold, even response.

The sufferer lifted his hand, making a sign that was understood by his fellows. In silence one advanced and touched his knife to the stout thongs which held the hands of The Man of Silk powerless behind him, beating a retreat with a celerity that was fairly ludicrous under the circumstances.

"Now—save me! Heal—kill this infernal—"

A fresh spasm cut his broken speech short. He leaned over the rude table, groaning, gasping, the picture of agony the most intense. A low muttering came from the gloomy shade into which the outlaws had retired, but The Man of Silk paid them no attention. He stood beside the wretch whom he had so adroitly deceived, rubbing his hands and wrists, the quicker to restore the interrupted circulation.

Then he emptied a second bottle into the water, stirring it with the muzzle of the revolver which he picked up from the table. The compound hissed and foamed, sending up little globules of water like spray in the lamplight; then ceased and remained as clear as at first. He deftly poured a small quantity of the mixture over the bandaged hand, despite the agonized writhings of the sufferer. He stepped back, restoring his weapons to their proper places, though they were still ready for swift use in case of need, laughing softly as the wounded road-agent gave a sudden start, catching his breath with a quick gasp.

"Gone! You have saved me from madness!" he panted, sinking back on his seat, trembling like a leaf.

"The pain has gone, but the poison still remains, and has not lost one particle of its virulence," coldly uttered The Man of Silk. "For two hours—possibly three, but no more—you will fancy all is well. You will feel no pain, but the poison is getting in its work, all the same."

"You lie! you are trying to frighten me again."

The little man in gray laughed coldly, contemptuously.

"That only comes from your lips. In your heart you know better. You see I am armed, my hands at liberty. With them bound, I got away with you, and one of your brag ruffians. With them free and armed, I can make it mighty lively for the rest of the gang if I choose. But I don't. As I told you at the jump-off, I have no particular grudge against you fellows. I am not a man-hunter. I may not be rich, but I'm too rich to look for head-money."

"I would have acted on the square with you, had you not tried to get the best of me in every manner. You were resolved to butcher me, whether or no, and so I had to play a double on you, in self-defense."

"I can save your life, if I choose, but I'll never do it with a revolver-muzzle looking into my face. I'll never do it with the point of a bowie pricking the skin over my heart. I'll save your life as a free man, or you'll go down to death inch by inch, joint by joint; and each succeeding hour will double discount all that has gone before it, in agony, in horrible torture!"

Coldly, almost without emphasis The Man of Silk uttered these sentences, standing before his trembling victim like one who holds the key to the situation in his own hands. And extravagant as his words may appear in cold type, not one within sound of his voice but believed every syllable he uttered. How could they doubt, after what they had already witnessed?

"I feel no pain—you have killed it!"

"Scotched, not killed, you should say," with a bland smile. "Nothing like being precise in such matters, my dear fellow. In two hours from now you will begin to feel the teeth of the serpent bite anew. And when you do feel it, it will be ten times worse than anything you have experienced thus far. All the torture which would have been spread over this interval will come out at a leap. Think of it, will you?"

"But you'll not be alive to laugh at my agony, curse you! I'll see to that, and right away! Men, you are there? You can hear me?"

"They can hear me, too," coldly interposed

The Man of Silk. "If I am killed—and there'll be a sweet little picnic before I pass in my checks!—nothing alive can save your life. Come!" with the first sign of impatience he had thus far exhibited. "Be sensible. I'll save your life, whether it is worth the trouble or not, for a consideration."

"Do you think I'll trust you again?" with vicious energy.

"Bah! if I am living when those pains come back, you'll go down on your knees to beg as a favor what you now throw away as a gift. Don't be a bigger idiot than nature planned in your making. Turn me out of this den, and I swear to give you the antidote to the poison that, even now, is eating its way surely toward your heart!"

"To set the bloodhounds onto us!" came a surly growl from out the shadow where the road-agents were ranged in eager listening.

"Is that where the shoe pinches tightest?" with a low laugh. "Well, that's easily remedied. Do I look to you like a man who would hunt up a lie when the truth serves better?"

"You lied to me, curse you!" snarled the wounded chief.

"Simply because you declined to listen to or entertain the truth; and I expressly barred out all such necessities, just now. If you had listened to me, and accepted the apology I made, you would not be in such a nasty box just now. You refused to listen, and fared all the worse. Some men would be mortally offended at such treatment, and sullenly decline to have anything more to do with such a boor; but I'm the sweetest-dispositioned man in seventeen counties. I can't bear to see a fellow-being suffer. I'm just aching to cure you up. But, unfortunately, circumstances will not allow me to do so, without a reward."

"You fellows think I'll set the bloodhounds of the law on your track if I am permitted to go out of this den on my own feet, but I'll take any oath you may dictate to never reveal by word, hint or sign where or what you are. I'll never whisper a word that can betray this place of hiding. I'll never guide or direct your enemies here. Why?"

"First, I am not a man-hunter. My tastes don't run that way. Second: no longer ago than this evening, I was flatly charged with being a criminal on whose head is placed a price worth a fortune. I am accused of being a murderer and a bank robber."

"It was a case of mistaken identity, of course, and I said as much. I was only half believed. Baby John Barcus warned me to run for it, if I was the man he wanted; pardship made him give the warning, but that wouldn't let him go any further, if he proved me the man he believed. Duty would override friendship, and he'd have to run me in."

"Now you see this little scrape bothers me. If I don't get back to Posey's Pocket before another night, I'll be set down as the actual criminal. I'll be branded as a coward and a liar. I'm neither. If you push me to the edge, you'll be convinced of that, for I'll make my teeth meet in the flesh wherever I fasten my grip. I'm not yearning for the test, but I'll do my level best to make it interesting for you all if you crowd me into it."

"This much for the crowd in general: now for you, in particular," as he turned once more toward the wounded chief. "I swear to you that you are doomed to suffer a death a thousand times more horrible than you can imagine, even after what you have undergone with that poisoned hurt. I swear to you that I am the only man living, or within reach, who can save you from that death. I swear to you that the antidote is not to be found among those vials," pointing to the little pocket-case.

"Now I give you my terms, and they are these: Your men will stand aside, and permit me to pass without lifting a hand to interfere. You will guide me out of this den, and to a safe distance beyond the entrance, until I can gain an idea of the ground around me. Then my hands can keep my head, and you can go."

"To die like a dog," grated the outlaw, suspiciously. "This is only another of your infernal tricks."

"You are hardly polite, my dear fellow," blandly smiled The Man of Silk. "If I didn't know that you were little better than a madman, just now, I might resent your painfully frank language. As it is, I pass it by, with a simple warning to guard your tongue better for the future."

"You know my terms now. Accept or reject them, but don't decide too hastily, for all of our sakes. Weigh the cost before you speak!"

There was a brief silence.

In the gloom, beyond the circle of light cast out by the lamp, the road-agents whispered together hurriedly.

At the table, his face pale and damp with the dews of past pain and doubts for the future, sat the chief, striving to read the truth in the face of the man who stood before him with folded arms.

And cold, stern, his face seemingly hard as marble, The Man of Silk waited for the decision that was to send him out into the world, a free agent once more, or else plunge him into a des-

perate fight for vengeance; fight for life it could scarcely be called, with the odds so heavily against him.

"Swear that you will not try to down me when outside and away from the men! Swear that you will give me the antidote—swear that it will not be another devilish trick like you played me before!" muttered the road-agent, fears overcoming his longing for revenge.

"I give you my oath to that effect," was the prompt response. "I swear to give you the antidote, and that within an hour after I have given it, there will not be an atom of poison in your body, arms or hand, save that bred from your natural wickedness," with a low laugh.

"Swear that you will never betray this hiding-place or set the bloodhounds on our track!"

"I have already passed my word to that effect, but I repeat the oath if it will do you any good or hasten your decision. I hold no sentimental grudge against you hawks of the mountains. You have never harmed me to speak of: a lump on the back of the head, that will be cured the moment I breathe the fresh air again."

"I'll trust you," slowly added the chief, rising to his feet, slipping his injured hand into the sling provided for it. "If you play me false the boys will bring you to account."

"Bet we will, boss!"

"If you whisper a word that can give us away, they'll learn of it in time to cheat the bloodhounds; and then the earth will not be big enough to hide you from their knives or pistols! You understand?"

"That you are losing precious time—yes!" was the cold retort. "Remember that I am not to give you the antidote until we are at a reasonable distance from this den; and not then if we are followed too close by any of these gentle birds of prey. And bear in mind that in two hours, at the outside, your pains will come back with a jump."

"You are witnesses, lads," said the chief, his voice harsh and unnatural with conflicting emotions.

It was hard to give over his longed-for revenge, when his prey was fairly in his grasp. But—that frightful agony! Anything was preferable to another such attack! And worse—could that be?

He shivered like a leaf in the wind at the bare doubt.

"Come, then," he muttered, with his sound hand touching the arm of the man who had faced them all down.

"At your service, my dear fellow!" laughed The Man of Silk, moving toward the whispering gang of road-agents.

His right hand was resting on a pistol-butt. His left hand held one drawn and cocked, ready to fire on the instant should what he more than half expected take place: should a knife be driven viciously in quest of his heart as he entered the gloom and came within arm's length of the outlaws.

He hardly dared hope they would let him pass without some such attempt at removing the one who threatened their destruction in knowing their secrets.

But no such attempt was made. Either they trusted to his pledged word, or else they feared to rob their chief of this last chance for escaping a frightful death.

The men gave way before them, and when the outer chamber was gained they separated, forming two ranks through which the chief led his master without a word on either part. Until the chamber was crossed; then The Man of Silk turned and uttered gravely:

"I repeat my pledge to you, boys. I'll not betray you. I'll not try to get nearer even than I am now; provided you let it drop at the same point. But don't try to follow too closely, for your captain's sake! I've got eyes all over me in a case of this sort. I'll spot you sure as death if you try to follow until I've doctored the chief to drop me with bullet or steel. He'll be the worst sufferer in this case, but all of you won't get off scot-free. Just bear this in mind, will you—it may save us all some trouble."

"I warn you, too, lads," sternly muttered the chief.

Without another word he led the way through a narrow cleft in the face of the cliff, emerging into the moonlighted night.

"Strike out toward Posey's Pocket, will you, until I can sort o' get the lay of the ground?" muttered The Man of Silk, casting swift, keen glances around him as though striving to "place himself."

Half an hour later they paused, The Man of Silk saying:

"You have done your part, and I'll do mine as faithfully. You were never poisoned, save in your imagination."

"Give me the antidote," grated the chief, his hand gripping that muscular arm with something of terror. "Don't leave me to die so—"

"By the grave of my sainted mother! I swear that you were deceived clear through!" earnestly replied the other. "Not to save my own life would I doom another to such a frightful death. That drug was innocent enough, only in increasing the pain of your fevered hurt. It would have faded away of itself, long ere this, but the

other stuff hastened its action. You are not poisoned. You are in no danger of death, if you take ordinary care of yourself. I swear this by that oath—an oath I would not violate, more than I would violate the grave in which those sacred bones are lying."

Despite his terror, the road-agent could not doubt the perfect truth of the words he now heard. A groan broke from his lips, but it was one of impotent fury. It was bitter indeed to be thus hoodwinked. To lose his prey, even when it was fairly within his grasp. And, worse than all, to lose it thus. To be so vilely tricked.

In his savage mortification, he forgot his partially crippled condition, forgot all save his renewed thirst for revenge; and whipping out a long knife, he struck viciously at the heart of his enemy.

Only to have his wrist fall into an iron grip. To have the weapon twisted from his hand and flung far away. To be flung himself a dozen yards off, reeling and staggering, saved only from falling in a half-paralyzed heap by bringing up in a pair of arms that closed around him in a hug that a grizzly bear might have envied.

"You, Baby!" ejaculated The Man of Silk, discovering and recognizing the big detective as his eyes followed his baffled foe.

"I reckon it is, Felix," was the cool response, as Baby John Barcus strode forward with the half-senseless road-agent in his arms.

"I left you back in Posey's Pocket, and—"

"You find me here," with a low laugh. "Say I took a stroll out in the moonlight for my health, and let it go at that."

"I might make a closer guess, but as you say, let it go at that. And I reckon we'd better be going ourselves, unless we want to find a hornets' nest buzzing about our ears with stingers out and poisoned."

"This fellow goes too. I want to ask him a few questions."

CHAPTER XVIII.

FOR BEAUTY AND BOOTY.

It is night once more, and though the moon has not yet risen high enough to clear the tree-crested hills to the east of the little cabin wherein Posey Curtis and Little Puss live, there is light sufficient to reveal moving objects on the slope behind the house.

An irregular shadow slowly moves across the white rocks, without sound to call attention to its movements. It pauses when the tree is reached on which Red Bergum came so near paying in full the penalty of his crimes. It passes into the shade cast by that tree, and is apparently swallowed up by it; for minutes creep by and the moving shadow is seen no more.

Another dark, indistinct shade goes silently down the slope, pausing at this boulder or beside yonder bush, but again moving on until it, too, is swallowed up by a larger shadow, cast by the cabin itself.

Swallowed up, but not extinguished. No longer a shadow, but a man!

He crouched down beneath the little window at the rear of the cabin, through which Red Bergum had forced his way in hopes of escaping from the avengers of blood.

The bars which that desperate fugitive had wrenched out were replaced by others, stronger, more firmly set. The wooden shutter was not closed, for the night was calm and still, and without this opening for ventilation, it would have been painfully oppressive in the little cabin.

The spy crouched beneath this window, holding his breath as he strained his hearing, listening for some sound to guide his judgment.

For a time he was baffled. All within seemed as still as the night without. One could almost believe the cabin deserted. But then—a low, quivering sound: a half-sigh, half-snore!

With eyes gleaming like phosphorescent globes, the spy slowly lifted his head until he could gaze in at the window. Not without more than one hesitation, more than one shrinking back with a shiver of dread, as the thought of a man glancing over the barrel of rifle or revolver and waiting only until his face should come above the level of the window-sill, struck him. But the work had to be done, and as another faint snore came through the opening, the spy rose erect and cast a swift, comprehensive glance through the window.

He saw Posey Curtis lying on the floor, only a few feet from the front door, peacefully sleeping, his faithful rifle within easy grasp of his right hand. No other human figure met his searching gaze, and when satisfied that Posey had no visitors, the spy sunk down and crept around to the other window, where he went through the same cautious maneuvers.

Here, as there, the spy could just make out a slumbering being, in this case lying upon a bed. And then he turned and glided silently back to the tree under which the larger shadow had vanished, some little time before.

"Well, what is it?" muttered a deep, hoarse voice as the spy halted.

"They're thar, both snoozin'."

"Then the job's good as done!" with an exultant laugh.

"All 'cept the doin' of it, boss," dryly chipped in the spy.

"What do you mean by that?" was the sharp demand. "What's easier than to shove Skinny through the hole, and let him give the scoundrel a tap on the pate as he opens the door to the rest of us?"

"Red lied, or else the critter's putt the bars up ag'in. A kid two year old couldn't git through the winder now, 'less he went in sections. We mought bu'st 'em out, but I'd rather be up a tree lookin' on then any closter. Posey's got his gun right in his grip, ef he is fast asleep, an' he'd make it mighty interestin', I reckon!"

A grating curse hissed through the clinched teeth of the mask who seemed to be the leader of the little band.

"Can you see the old fool from the window?"

"He's layin' on the floor, snorin' away ten mile a-hour!"

"Could you make out if the front door was barred? But of course it was!" answering the question for himself, with an angry gesture.

"I couldn't make out fer sart'in, but I wouldn't mind goin' odds onto it. The old coon ain't nigh so big a fool as he looks, an' I reckon he'll look fer us to come back to git even."

"If it was only the girl!" muttered the leader, moodily.

"It'd be too easy!" chimed in the spy, who was seemingly a privileged character, since he alone had shared the interchange with the masked chief.

"It's risky shooting in the dark, but I don't see how we can get at it in any other way. Posey wouldn't bite to a decoy—think?"

"Not a nibble, boss!" was the prompt response. "Ef he was to bite, it'd be a hull mouthful, an' with his gun. An' let him git oncet fairly waked up an' knowin' to us bein' 'round, an' he'd hold the fort ag'in' twicet our crowd—Posey would! He's mighty bad medicine, now I tell ye!" emphatically muttered the spy, shaking his head gravely.

"Why not lay low till day, then down him as he sticks his head out for a sniff of daylight?" suggested one of the party.

"That might answer, if it was only a snatch and break-away to the hills; but that's not the programme. We've got to twist the truth out of the old fellow, right on the spot, to make sure. It won't be an over-easy job at the best, and may take time. By day, who'll guarantee us from interruption? That infernal Mark Too-good is stirring Posey's Pocket up with a red-hot rod, swearing to wipe the family from off the face of the earth! If he gets up his crowd, maybe he'll come here in hopes of striking our trail. If he comes, why not in the morning? Curse the crooked luck, anyway!"

"Boss," interposed one of the band who had maintained silence throughout, now lifting himself from his careless, lounging attitude beside a boulder. "Ef I mought take a little scoot down yender, mebber I kin fetch back better word then Dowdy did."

"Ef you do, it'll be a lie!" snapped the offender.

"Fer I won't look at it from jest the same p'int, ye see," equably added the little road-agent. "Mind, I say mebber!"

"What have you got in your head now, Skinny?"

"I'd rather not tell, boss, ontel I've tuck a good look down yender," was the quiet response. "Mebber I'm as big a fool as Dowdy thar is thinkin' me. Mebber it can't be worked the way it hits me now. Ef it can't, they'll be time aplenty fer lookin' up another openin'."

"Climb out, then," with a doubting echo in his voice. "Make as much haste as you can, for time is flyin'."

Skinny instantly stole away, quickly vanishing from view, keenly as his comrades watched his movements. In silence they waited the result, the chief standing alone with arms folded across his chest, gazing moodily down at the lone cabin, his men with heads close together, discussing the work before them in guarded whispers.

They were not kept long in suspense. As silently as he had stolen away, Skinny returned to the shade of the tree.

"Well?" impatiently demanded the masked chief.

"It kin be done, I'm pritty sure, boss," was the quiet response.

"A cat couldn't slip through that winder!" snapped the spy.

"Nur a cat couldn't git in the way I've spotted, ef thar was a cookin' fire goin' on in the fireplace," laughed Skinny.

"Down the chimney?" ejaculated the chief.

"Can you make it?"

"I don't mind tryin' it on, ef you'll promise to kiver me, boss."

"Out with it, then, and in a hurry."

"From the bigness as looked at from the ground, I reckon a body of my bigness mought slide down the hole 'thout bein' greased, boss," with a soft chuckle. "But mebber I'm fooled. Mebber I'd stick in the hole, an' hev to kick up row enough in gittin' up or down to roust up

Posey. Ef I should—waal, right thar's whar I want your help, ye see."

"How? Don't waste time in making me guess, confound you," angrily snapped the irritable chief.

"Give me your word you'll keep Posey kivered, from the winder. Say you'll drop him with a bullet if I roust him out in tryin', an' I'll make the rattle, boss."

The chief maintained silence for a few moments, as though carefully weighing the matter before deciding. Then he spoke, decisively:

"I'll do it. We've got to get in, some way. If you can slip down-chimney and open the door for a rush, without rousing the old man, the rest will be easy work. If you alarm him, I'll bring him down from the window, crippled if I can do it without too much risk to you. The rest of the boys will be at the door, to break it down if they hear me burn powder. If I have to kill the old fool, we must twist the truth out of Little Puss, boss or no boss."

"That's all I ax, an' I'm ready as soon as the rest kin git in persition," promptly answered Skinny, stripping off his belt of arms, his boots, and all extra clothing, only retaining a long and venomous-looking knife.

"You know your part, lads," continued the chief, himself looking to his revolvers. "Get a log if you can without too much loss of time; if not, take a heavy rock and be ready to use it the best you know how if I have to burn powder. When the game opens, it wants mighty swift and true playing. You understand?"

There could be but one answer to this question, and that answer came promptly, unanimously. Then Skinny glided silently down the slope accompanied by the chief, the rest of the band veering slightly to the right to pass around the cabin on the end where there was no window.

All proceeded in perfect silence from this on, for not a man engaged in the evil work but fully realized the peril that would be theirs should Posey Curtis rouse to a full knowledge of their presence before all was in readiness to take him foul.

Side by side the chief and Skinny peered in at the window, assuring themselves that Posey still lay unconscious on the floor. They could hear his steady breathing. They could just distinguish the rifle that lay ready to his hand in case of an alarm. And then, knowing their mates were ready for their part of the job, the twain noiselessly moved around to the end of the cabin where stood the huge chimney.

Skinny lifted one bare foot, and with it in the strong grasp of the chief he deftly reached the low roof. Not a sound betrayed his movements as he crept up to where he could peer down the chimney. In breathless suspense the chief watched him, choking back a growl of satisfaction as Skinny waved his hand in triumph.

The hole was large enough to admit his diminutive, skeleton-like figure.

The chief glided back to the window, smothering the click of his pistol by holding back the trigger until the hammer was raised. Then, with one hand thrust through the bars, covering the recumbent figure with his weapon, he waited for the next move.

This was not long delayed. A faint sound came to his ears: so faint and indistinct that had he not been listening with all his powers it would have passed without notice. Or, if heard, and he had not already known the cause, he could not have placed it.

Then, silent as a ghost, he saw the dark figure of Skinny steal out from the fire-place, pausing near the middle of the floor to cast a look in his direction. A slight movement of the armed hand reassured the sneak, and Skinny stole foot by foot toward the door.

He dared not attempt to step directly over the slumbering giant, so he had to make a little *détour*, passing around his feet, one hand clutching his knife, ready for use in case the sleeper should rouse and leap upon him. Past the feet, around to the door!

"He'll make it!" muttered the chief, beneath his breath, as he watched the movements of his fellow, his eyes glowing redly through the twin apertures in his sable mask. "He's worth his weight in gold! He's got the bar—he's good as won—Ha!"

Skinny reached the door and placed the knife betwixt his teeth as both hands grasped the strong, heavy wooden bar which formed the main fastening to the door. Slowly, steadily, cautiously he raised one end of the bar from its resting-place, his gleaming eyes fixed on the face of the sleeper. Already the victory seemed won, when, with a sharp cling and clatter, an overlooked chain fell from its fastening.

With a sharp, angry cry, Posey Curtis raised up, only to fall again as a pistol exploded. And at the same instant Skinny jerked the bar free, bringing it down with crushing force full on the unprotected head of the gold-prospecter!

"Down with the door!" yelled the chief, running around the cabin in hot haste, his words mingling with a loud crashing noise as the road-agents hurled their massive weapons against the barrier.

It flew open, knocking Skinny fairly into the

grasp of the old man, whose fingers instantly closed on his neck with a terrible grip, despite his own dazed and crippled condition.

Mingling with the wild uproar came the shrill scream of a girl, and as the chief leaped in at the door, he saw Little Puss fling open her door, a vision in white!

Not a harmless one, however. Even her sudden awaking did not drive the teachings of Posey Curtis from her brain, and she instinctively caught up the revolver which was her constant companion, by night as by day. And as she saw the masked men flock into the cabin, she flung up her hand and began to work the trigger, sending her lead in rapid succession into the mass. Only to have the weapon twisted from her hand as the masked chief leaped forward and grappled with her, bearing her back against the bed as he thundered:

"Alive—take him alive, you demons!"

In vain Little Puss struggled to free herself, thinking only of her father. In vain she strove to cry aloud for help, though help was so terribly far away! That fierce grip upon her throat smothered her shrieks. The heavy weight pressing her backward on the bed was far too much for her powers to contend with. And a few seconds later the sheet was wrapped about her head and face so tightly as to almost suffocate her. Then her arms were twisted behind her, and a sharp click told that handcuffs were locked upon her wrists.

"How is it out there, lads?" cried the chief, panting from his struggle to master the maiden. "Got him? Alive?"

"Yes, we've got him!" came a husky voice.

"He's got Skinny, too!"

Satisfied that Little Puss was beyond giving any further trouble, for a time at least, the chief hurried out into the other room. He saw several forms lying on the floor. Among them that of Posey Curtis, motionless, his hands fastened behind him with irons, two men still grasping his ankles.

Not a bloodless victory, though!

The spy looked up from his examining Skinny, his face white and blood-marked. Though so crippled, Posey had made his mark. Skinny was dead, his throat crushed and torn, looking as though a panther had been trying its teeth thereon!

Another mask lay still in death, blood soaking through his sable disguise, a bullet through his brain. Another lay groaning and gasping in the corner, where he had reeled as Little Puss shot him through the lungs. Gasping, but not for long. Before the chief could gain his side, his head drooped and his body rolled over, a corpse.

A grating curse passed through the clinched teeth of the leader as he counted up the cost of that brief struggle.

"He'll have to pay the penalty, curse him!" he snarled, stooping and rolling the giant over so as to look into his face. "You fools!" he cried, viciously, flashing a burning glare around the room as he saw how pale, how corpse-like Posey was. "You've killed him! You've thrown away our chances of gaining the big bonanza!"

"I don't reckon he's croaked, boss," ventured one of the masks, and perhaps it was fortunate for him that just then Posey Curtis opened his eyes, with a feeble struggle to free himself.

"Good enough!" laughed the chief, with ferocious glee as he saw this sudden rebuttal to the charge made. "Look to him, boys! Nurse him back to sense and reason, while I look after the little beauty in yonder! I reckon we'll come out top o' the heap, after all!"

Despite her ironed hands, Little Puss had managed to free her face of its covering, and as the chief entered, she was just rising to her feet. He quickly gained her side, speaking swiftly:

"Unless you want to drive your father crazy, girl, hold your tongue for a little! He's in a mighty bad way as it is, but—"

"Let me go to him!" gasped Little Puss, forgetting all save the peril of the parent she loved so dearly.

"Just as you are, little one?" with a sneering laugh that pointed his words. "Look here, girl: this is pure business. We don't mean to harm either you or Posey any more than we can help. All we want is his money, and when that is in our hands, you both can go free as air. Now, if you love the old man, you'll do your level best to talk him into forking over. He's hurt—I don't deny that. He needs your care, if he is to get over it all right. And if you swear by all you hold holy not to try on any of your tricks—there's two dead men out yonder now, thanks to your shooting—I'll let you go to him. Your answer?"

"I promise—I swear—only let me go to him!" gasped Puss.

"If you break that oath, his will be the punishment," adroitly threatened the outlaw, as he unlocked the handcuffs and freed her arm. "We can't hurt you as a woman, but we can take it out of your dad. And take it out we will! Do you follow me?"

"I swear—only let me go to him!"

"Slip on a dress, then. Put on your shoes, too. Lively! We've got to get out of this be-

fore long, but we can't go without taking his secret store with us. Dress and come out. Empty-handed, mind you, unless you want to be the death o' the old fellow!"

Satisfied that the poor girl was sufficiently warned, the chief turned and left the little chamber. He found Posey Curtis propped up in one corner of the room, pale and weak, but with a defiant scowl upon his weather-beaten features.

"Two of you fellows go out and take a look around. Some prowler may have caught the sound of those shots. Keep within call, though," he rapidly uttered, then turned to Posey Curtis, saying harshly:

"We've got you two; now we want your wealth, old codger!"

CHAPTER XIX.

LUCKY BARRETT ON HIS MUSCLE.

"THAT'S all right for them as thinks so, pard, but when the say-so comes to me, I'm throwin' up my hands an' huntin' my hole. Not that I'm skeered, mind ye; I kin fetch a doctor's stiff tick to show I was vaccinated ag'in' that when I wasn't higher'n the hopes of a critter with seven-spot-high, an' straights barred out. Not that I'm skeered; but I'm too tired to take any sech intrust into the frolic; I want to bunk in early, an' stop thar late."

"Then you think—"

"Too much trouble, pard. I know! So'll you when it comes, but don't let me pull ye away. Stay an' see it out. Write my name an' address on a keerd an' pin it to your buzzum. Then, ef you should git layed out in the frolic, the mourners'll know whar to fetch you fer plantin'!"

"But I don't see—"

"Of course ye don't see, or I wouldn't be here chinnin' till yit! From seein' to feelin' is the shortest step I know, an' I'm goin' to git out o' the wilderness afore then. You kin stay, an' mebbe you'll come through on your own legs. Ef ye do, you'll know a heap more'n ye do now, 'bout some things! Fer one, you'll know that when Lucky Barrett mixes up whisky an' keerds, with a white-faced wrostlin' round like he's showin' up this eve, it means heaps o' fun fer them as kin tell of it in the mornin' without hev'in' to borry a tongue to say it all, or some other hands to make the 'propriate motions! So long, pard! I'm gittin' too mortal sleepy fer to linger any longer. Sleepy-with-a-p-y-py, mind ye; not skeered!"

Sleepy Billy Goodnight ambled away with an eye over his shoulder until safely out of the saloon, leaving his recent acquaintance to furtively watch the movements of a fairly good-looking fellow with brown eyes and brown beard, mentally on the fence as to which would be the wisest course to pursue in case his pard's predictions should come true; to plunge under the handiest table, or make a break for the door?

Sleepy Billy was not the only person who noticed and commented on the sudden change which had come over the usually quiet, steel-nerved sport, Lucky Barrett. Some said they first noticed the change quite early in the day; others that it was only after Mark Toogood and his mates began to actively beat up recruits for the war-path; and that was hardly before the setting of the sun on the day succeeding the little matinee at Posey Curtis's cabin, when Little Puss sustained her right to the proud title of "Pride of Posey's Pocket" by "standing off" four good men with her little gun.

Not that any particular odium was flung upon Booth Barrett for the part he had played in that affair; if anything, he stood higher in the estimation of the citizens than before; but if he was not worked up about it in some manner, why was he so altered? Why taking the war-path? Why going about with a big chip on his shoulder, his actions and looks, plainer than mere words, asking somebody to knock it off?

If they had known where and how Booth Barrett had passed the greater portion of the past night, the enigma might have been solved with far less trouble and certainty; but so well had the young sport played his part that not a single soul in Posey's Pocket so much as suspected him of being Little Puss's lover.

For all, Lucky Barrett made no bluster, no flashy parade, though it was so generally conceded that he was "on his muscle" that evening. He passed from saloon to saloon, from gaming-house to gaming-house, drinking and inviting others to drink at the former, and dropping more or less money at the tables in the other places. The more he drank, the cooler he seemed to grow. Only his face turned whiter, his brown eyes brighter, his smile more icy.

Only once did he give a clue to his possible incentive. It was when some person spoke of the efforts of Mark Toogood in raising a crowd to hunt down Red Bergum and his mates.

"I'd hate to try to catch the turn on that combination," he said, with a short, icy laugh. "One little girl stood off the four; one little rat would make her climb a tree; Red Bergum is a terrier, and he had half a score more in his pack; guess at the kennel behind them, and then try to mark the number of recruits Mark

Toogood must muster in before he can tackle the lay-out! And you say Mark is about as good as they make 'em. If so, his recruits can't be any heavier metal. Make your bets, gentlemen. I'm keeping bank on this little game! Patriotism is good enough in its way, but ducats weigh heavier in one's pocket. And I'll cover almost any reasonable odds that Mark don't ketch a clam!"

This was all that Lucky Barrett had to say against Mark Toogood, but that was enough to show which way the wind blew, and there did not lack busy-bodies to carry the word to the burly miner.

"Tell Lucky Barrett not to crow too mighty loud, will you?" growled the miner, with slow emphasis. "I ain't holdin' any pertick'lar grudge ag'in' him fer what he done yest'day. He backed up Little Puss, jest as I'd 'a' done my own self with the same chance. He showed grit, but who wouldn't, knowin' that nobody'd make a break, long's the little gal stood 'in the gate?' It was grit, but sca'ce the sort to brag over. Tell him I said so. Tell him to button up his lip, fer he ain't at Posey's cabin now, but in Posey's Pocket!"

The message was duly delivered, and Lucky Barrett showed his white teeth in an icy smile. He made no reply; perhaps he preferred delivering it in person.

Mark Toogood was busy enough that same evening. He and his mates had carried aid to their wounded fellows. Those alive on their going over the back-trail, were conveyed to Posey's Pocket, where they were used as an eloquent argument in favor of a war of extermination against Red Bergum and his allies. The story of that tragic race was told, time and time again. The virtues of Jim Magill and Tom Magatagan were chanted with tongues that never tired, to those who had known the unfortunates in life, as well as those who had never heard of the men before.

Posey's Pocket was not a large place, though quite a marvel of bustle and activity, both in a purely business way, and for undiluted sport after business hours. Both Lucky Barrett and Mark Toogood, the latter in company with his three pards, circulated through the town with but brief halts, yet something seemed to keep them from coming in actual contact until quite a late hour.

"That's what says they ain't goin' to be jest a thunder-gust, with a cl'ar sky trompin' close on to its heels," shrewdly uttered Sleepy Billy Goodnight, shaking his shaggy head and edging toward the door. "Slow to git thar, long to stay. It's airly yit, but somehow thar's a mighty heap o' dust gittin' into the two eyes o' me. Reckon it's time I was lookin' out fer my bunk. A whirlygust o' that sort is wuss then morphine, lodlum, parrygorickan' Chinee-smoke to me—it is so!"

Sleepy Billy was not the only one who seemed to expect something out of the ordinary course of events, and at least two others kept a close if covert watch over the movements of Lucky Barrett, following him from place to place, though not always together, or always crossing the same threshold.

These two were The Man of Silk and Baby John Barcus, who had not been seen in Posey's Pocket that day until almost evening. Where they had been, or how passed the intervening hours, none knew save themselves, though there were at least two persons in town who would have given considerable to find out.

"I don't stick up for an idiot, pard," muttered the giant on one occasion as the twain lingered in the shadows outside a saloon in which Lucky Barrett was making the heart of the owner glad by his lavish expenditure of gold. "I sometimes think I can see through a hole in a millstone just as well as the next; but I'm up a stump now. What sort of game is it you want to play? You want that fellow with the full beard, but if you want him *bad* why don't you give him the grip?"

"Don't stop over, Baby," was the laughing response. "Don't stick so close to the shop. Don't forget that a fellow out of the profession can keep an eye on another, without meaning to twist a rope about his neck. Don't forget that a man can have more friends than one; even if that one is as big and capable as Baby John Barcus."

"If it's pure friendship, I reckon you'd show it better by asking that young sport to take a walk with you," dryly muttered the detective. "The atmosphere is unhealthy, and he's doing his level best to make it still more binding. Dollars to cents that he gets a beautiful head put on him before the crack o' day."

"Not if we can hinder, Baby," was the quick response. "I love that youngster as though he was a twin brother. And if I don't care to turn the weight of his fist against my head, I'm going to see that he comes through this little racket without doing or receiving any serious damage."

"I'm with you, of course. Just tip me the wink, and sort o' shadow out the line you want me to follow. I'll do what I can, pard."

Lucky Barrett kept on his way, apparently wholly ignorant of the suppressed excitement which his unusual conduct was giving birth to.

If he saw, he neither heeded nor gave a sign of pleasure or dislike. He poured down the poison, and poured out the gold, always with that cold, dangerous smile, always with that glittering devil in his brown eyes.

If Little Puss could have seen him then!

All he drank seemed to have not the slightest effect upon him, unless it was to make his face still whiter, his eyes larger and more brilliant. It certainly did not affect his legs nor his tongue. The one bore him as uprightly, as lithely as ever, the other seemed even more smooth and nimble than usual.

At "The Wheel of Fortune" came his first pause of any length. This was "the" gambling hell of Posey's Pocket, and the only one in town where the "limit" was ever suspended to accommodate a heavy better on request.

Lucky Barrett dropped a few coins on the painted "lay-out" with the same unusual carelessness that had marked his movements thus far; but, contrary to his former experience, his wagers won. Then the old fever, which never entirely deserts a born gambler, sprang up into full glow, and he sat down in one of the chairs provided for better.

"That's the first color I've hit for a week, Johnny," he said, with a soft laugh, his brown eyes beaming brightly across the table. "Reck on this is good enough for me. You'll let down the bars for an old customer, I suppose?"

"Our capital is our limit, to you, Lucky," was the prompt response.

"Never mind figuring it up, Johnny. I'll see what it amounts to in an hour or so," laughed Barrett, with practiced hand placing his bets. "Let the game go on, Johnny! I've got a mascot up each sleeve, and a luck-stone under my tongue! Sorry for you, but business is business, you know!"

"You'll lend a wipe to dry our tears when the bank's empty, and that's consolation enough for a swine!" smiled the dealer, as he began to slip the cards from the bright box.

"He's fixed, until his pouch is emptied," muttered Baby John Barcus, in an undertone.

"Unless— I knew it must come!" breathed The Man of Silk, with a swift frown, as he caught the bluff tones of Mark Toogood suddenly breaking out in the saloon in front of the building.

At the same moment a peculiar change came over the face of the smiling gambler. The smile vanished, and a sudden hardness came into his voice as he pushed back his chair, sweeping down the as yet undecided bets.

"Johnny, I crawfish! Got an engagement. See you later!"

"I'll be here, Lucky," was the calm response, though the white, ring-decked hand slipped swiftly beneath the table to grasp a double-action revolver that lay on a little shelf before him.

But his suspicion was misdirected. Lucky Barrett did not glance toward him as he pocketed his gold. His eyes were turned toward the saloon, though the heavy curtains which fell over the archway between the two rooms concealed all beyond from view. And the gambler strode swiftly to the curtains, sweeping them aside and passing through, close upon the heels of a big and a little man.

"You haven't asked me to enlist under your banner of blood, Mark Toogood," smiled the gambler, facing the burly miner.

"I'm pickin' my men, Lucky Barrett, an' you ain't the sort I've got any use fer," was the growling retort.

"Didn't relish the taste you got yesterday, I suppose?"

Mark Toogood flushed hotly, then turned as pale as his coating of tan and sunburn would permit. His voice was hoarse and unnatural as he spoke again, one stumpy forefinger quivering before that white face.

"Don't crowd me too close, Lucky Barrett! I'm not my own man, jest now. You know that, or you wouldn't bristle up so mighty piert! Until I git Red Bergum an' his feller imps, I can't lick anybody else on my own a'count. But don't crowd me too hard. They ain't no woman here fer to hide you behind her pettiness, now!"

"Else you would crow far louder and fiercer, Mark Toogood. You were mighty brave then—in words! You are mighty brave now—in your own mind!" coldly smiled the gambler.

White and stern the burly miner stood before the gambler, his form trembling with suppressed rage, his voice hardly articulate as he said:

"You hearn me say my han's was bound by a oath to my butchered pards. You hearn me say I couldn't mix up in a row with anybody outside o' that pestiferous gang ontel I'd wiped out the black score that's writ down ag'in' 'em. You hearn me say all this, or you wouldn't dare speak them words, Lucky Barrett!"

"Dare?" with an icy smile. "You are not nearly big enough to measure my daring, Mark Toogood. You are—"

"A white man—an' you're a dirty coward!" Swifter than the eye could follow a right arm shot out, and stricken fairly between the eyes, Mark Toogood was hurled half-way across the room, to drop a quivering, bleeding mass of humanity!

More than ever was the eye at fault. Men yelled and cursed, leaping forward or back, as fear or revenge actuated them. Pistols were drawn and discharged. Knives flashed in the lamplight.

Only for an instant. Then the lights went out with a crash and tinkle of breaking glass, casting all into intense darkness.

There was a moment's silence. Only a single instant.

Then the reports of firearms blended with the clash of steel, the oaths and curses of infuriated men. Then the red glare of burning powder lit up the frightful *melee* with fitful flashes, showing nearly a score of men mixed in one mass, striking, shooting, struggling like veritable demons gone mad!

There were groans and screams of agony as bullet or steel touched a vital spot. But this only seemed to urge the infuriated beings to still more desperate deeds.

Then, high above the mad uproar came a single voice:

"Loose your grip, you—"

The curtains were torn down, letting in a flood of light. The mass separated, but Lucky Barrett was not to be seen!

CHAPTER XX.

HE MIGHT HAVE BEEN WORSE.

POSEY CURTIS looked up at the covered face, growling:

"Take it an' git, durn ye! I only wish they was enough to drink the lot o' ye dead with the jim-jams!"

"We'll run that risk and never flinch, old fellow!" laughed the mask, his eyes flashing with double luster at this unexpected answer.

"Where is the wealth, Posey? Out with it! Bear in mind that the less trouble you give us, the less trouble we'll give you!"

"In my pocket—whar else? Think I tote it in a gunnysack?"

"Thar it is, boss: not enough to dizzy one sound head!" indignantly muttered one of the road-agents, holding out a dingy hand in the palm of which gleamed a few yellow and white coin.

"It's all I've got: what more kin you ax?" snapped the veteran gold-hunter, his eyes aglow. "Ef it ain't enough, knock off these bracelets, an' though I hain't the use o' but one hand, I'll fight ye fer the balance. One, two—or the hull caboodle, ef no less'll do!"

"Father—poor, dear daddy!"

Partially dressed, Little Puss stopped short as she stepped from her chamber into the lighted room, her voice breaking as she saw Posey bound and bleeding, yet defying his enemies with all the old fire.

The masked chief turned quickly at the sound of her voice, and though she made an effort to elude his grasp, caught her by the arm and led her forward, checking her as she was about to drop to her knees beside the wounded veteran, speaking sharply, sternly:

"Remember you're not all there is to this little game, Posey Curtis. I'd hate terribly to ill treat a young lady as nice and dainty as our Little Puss; but if we can't get at your voice any other way, we'll have to try what pinching her will do. You sabe, Posey?"

"You black-faced demon!" grated the old man, starting forward, only to be checked by his daughter, as she wrested her arm free and dropped on her knees beside him.

"Daddy—dear daddy!" she sobbed, tears filling her eyes as they almost choked her voice. "Do not anger him—for my sake!"

"And wiser words were never uttered, Posey," laughed the road-agent, standing before his captives with arms folded. "It's all for her sake, mind you! Right there you strike the keynote. We know you're too gritty to be readily frightened. We know you're too much of a miser to be easily scared out of your gold. But we know that Little Puss is as the apple of your eye, and we count on her to fetch you 'round."

"Hurt her, an' I'll hunt ye off o' the face o' the airth!" grated Curtis, his sunken eyes gleaming like coals of living fire.

"Ghosts don't count, nowadays, Posey," was the sneering response. "If we have to torture the little lady, through your infernal obstinacy, I reckon you'll have to take our trail as a ghost if you take it at all certainly you'll never take it up alive!"

"He will tell, only give him time," murmured Little Puss, glancing up at that masked face, her own pale as death.

"There isn't much time to waste. Bring him to terms in a holy hurry, or we'll have to put on the noose-twist in good earnest."

"He is shot—see! how it bleeds!" panted Puss, her little hands red with blood that flowed from the bullet-shattered right arm. "He will die if you keep him thus. Let me free his arms—or it is iron!—and he dying! For shame, you cowards!"

"I reckon you might as well take off the bracelets for a bit, Dowdy," said the chief, after a brief hesitation. "Big fool as he is, I hardly think Posey will try to cut up rusty as long as his girl is safe in our grip. Free his hands, but leave his hoofs hampered."

The spy obeyed orders, though it was with

slow and sullen actions that mutely protested against showing even such scant mercy to the cause of their comrades' death. The handcuffs were removed, and Little Puss choked back her sobs as she tenderly examined the broken arm.

"If there is a spark of manhood about you, give me time to bandage this terrible hurt," she cried, chokingly, as the masked outlaw uttered an impatient ejaculation. "He will bleed to death. See how white his poor face is getting! Daddy—poor, poor daddy!"

"It'll be slobber, slobber, chin, chin, from now till plum daylight!" sourly muttered Dowdy, falling back with suppressed disgust in every move.

The masked chief caught at the hint thus conveyed, his tones growing hard and metallic as he spoke rapidly:

"If that happens, it will be through his and your obstinacy, Little Puss. You know what we've come here for; the gold out of Posey's Pocket. Point that out, and we'll leave you to slobber over each other all your sweet fancies desire. Give it up, Posey, and the sooner your arm will be put in fix for taking our trail to get even. If not—well, you'll hear your dainty little kitten begin to squall in the jaws of my patent bulldogs."

"Touch her, an' I'll kill you!" grated Posey, livid with fury, as he caught Little Puss with his sound arm and drew her into the corner, partly behind him as he half started to his feet.

His right arm dangled helplessly at his side. His feet were bound together. He was unarmed. But there was a ferocity in his glowing eyes that made the man in the mask involuntarily recoil a few feet, one hand dropping to the pistols in his belt.

It might have fared hard with the bold veteran, only for the startling interruption which came just then.

A sharp cry—several shots, fired in rapid succession—a man staggering in through the door, to gasp as he fell headlong:

"We didn't see—too late—"

A burst of blood from his perforated lungs checked the words, and before the road-agents could fairly realize what had happened, a dark form plunged across the threshold, twin spouts of fire shooting ahead of him, a husky voice crying out:

"Dodge, little angel! Lay low an' keep kivered the best—"

"You, Red Bergum!" snarled the startled chief, whipping forth a revolver and trying to cover this unexpected assailant.

The weapon exploded, but the lead flew wide of its intended mark. The chief sunk in a heap under a crushing blow. Posey dealt it—hampered, crippled though he was, Posey dealt the blow.

Even as the alarm first broke forth, he caught sight of the heavy bar lying where Skinny dropped it after felling him, and throwing himself forward, the veteran grasped the bar with his left hand, whirling it around as he regained his knees, bringing it down upon the head of the masked chief, with all the power of a muscular arm, nerved by desperation and a fierce longing for revenge. Just in time to save the life of Red Bergum from that bullet at last.

The force of that blow threw Posey Curtis forward upon his face, and Little Puss, fearful for his life, flung herself upon his back, imploring him to lie still, to submit to the inevitable, to—

Even as she spoke the wild tumult died away. And then—

"Little angel! say you ain't hurt!" came a hoarse, choking voice through the thick smoke.

A man sunk on his knees by her side, his bloody hands clasped together as though longing, yet fearing, to touch her sacred person. A face bent over her, strained and haggard, with quivering lips. The face of the fainting wretch whom she had interfered to save from the rope of his enemies—the face of Red Bergum.

"Let up, Puss!" panted Posey, hoarsely. "It's them or us, now! It's lick or be tortured wuss then—"

"They won't pester ye no more, pard!" chuckled Red Bergum, sinking back, one hand shipping up to his left breast as though something was the matter with his heart. "They're past any more deviltry, I reckon. An' it was me that done it—fer your sake, little angel! Fer the sake o' the angel as stood the boun's off when they wanted to—stretch my neck! Fer you, Little Puss! All fer you!"

His voice grew tlicker, hoarser, as though something was rising up in his throat to clog the organs of speech. Fainter, slower, as he sunk back like one suddenly overtaken by fatigue, his hand still pressing against his side.

With a sharp ejaculation, Posey Curtis pushed Little Puss aside, glaring about him with a bewildered air. Until that moment he failed to comprehend what had really happened. In his mad fury he had never once thought of an ally, such as this. He thought the shots were aimed at himself. That he must fight the gang unaided, to win or die.

The blue smoke had lifted to the ceiling, and the lamp gave light sufficient for him to take in the grim, appalling scene.

There lay the figure of the masked chief, his

head in a growing pool of blood. Beyond him lay Dowdy, curled up in a heap, still quivering like a beheaded serpent, but as harmless. And there—not one of the road-agents kept their feet!

It seemed a miracle!

"Waal, that gits me!" ejaculated Posey, with a long-drawn breath, sinking back upon his bound feet, staring half-dazed into the blood-stained face of the man before him.

Little Puss was scarcely less astonished, but she had forethought enough to spring to her feet and close the door, dropping the blood-marked bar into its sockets, then crossing over and swinging to the heavy oaken shutter at the window in the rear. Then, catching up the repeating-rifle which had dropped from Posey's grasp as Skinny turned upon him with the bar, she sprang back to her father.

Red Bergum watched her movements, a faint smile upon his haggard face. He shook his head and spoke, not without more than one effort:

"They ain't any more, Little Puss. I counted 'em. They're past any more deviltry. An' I ain't sorry, though—they was pards. They didn't ought to—an angel, like—"

"He's got it—got it hard, too," exclaimed Posey, forgetting his bound ankles in his excitement as he saw the speaker reel, then sink over sideways, his eyes still fixed upon Little Puss. "Help—ugh!"

He fell forward as he tried to spring to his feet. A sharp cry escaped his lips as a horrible twinge of pain shot through his broken arm, sending a red blur over all objects in the room. And then—his senses left him for the time being.

When Posey Curtis recovered his senses, he was lying on the floor in his daughter's bedroom, his head supported by a pillow, his right arm bandaged and fastened to a rude splint. Little Puss had dragged him from the midst of the dead, but her strength was insufficient to place his heavy weight upon the bed. Her hands had cared for his hurt as best she knew how. And this done, she was kneeling at his side, her hot tears bathing his haggard face.

"He's got it—hard," muttered Posey, his brain taking up the broken thread mechanically. "Whar is he, Puss? The man—that fit?"

"Daddy—dear daddy!" sobbed the poor child, her overtaken powers giving way entirely. "I thought—you looked so—dead."

"Dead be durned!" almost angrily ejaculated the tough old man, as he sat up, his eyes beginning to show something of their usual fire and animation. "Nothin' but a clip on the head an' a hole through—ugh!"

An incautious movement sent a thrill of pain through his injured limb, and Little Puss shivered anew as she tenderly sought to assist him back to the pillow.

"You are awfully hurt, daddy. You will kill yourself. Please lie down, and try to sleep. Oh! if I could only go to town for a doctor!"

"You've doctored me heap plenty, Kitty-puss," was the response, as Posey resisted her efforts, and rose slowly, carefully to his feet. "See! he must 'a' fit. An' I didn't see nothin' of it at all, I was so hot. Whar is he, Puss? You hain't left him all alone this long?"

"I don't know—I could see and think only of you, daddy."

Posey flung open the door, to utter a low cry as he saw a head feebly lift up in the lamplight, only to fall back with a low, faint sigh of disappointment. And to catch a husky voice:

"I thought it was—the angel. But I done it. She's safe. Ef he don't come—ef I ain't croaked afore I kin tell."

"It ain't nigh so bad as that, stranger?" softly muttered Posey, as he stepped over the motionless body of the masked chief, kneeling at the side of Red Bergum. "Hit, mebbe, but not hit so hard?"

"I've got it—bad!" with a faint smile as the sunken eyes opened to look up into that grave, kindly face. "But—I saved her!"

"An' she'll save you, too! Puss! Puss, I say!"

"Don't—too ugly—for her!" gasped Red Bergum, with a glance around the room. "No good—I'm goin'. Don't bother—her!"

"The whisky, Puss!" sharply cried Posey, paying no heed to the feeble remonstrance of the injured man.

But even as he spoke, he knew that there was little if any hope for this man who had dared and done so much for them. His sound hand gently opened the blood-soaked clothes, and his experienced eye told him that he was looking upon mortal injuries. Only a miracle could save the life of this outcast.

But he persisted. He gave the poor wretch whisky; then, aided by Little Puss, whom his sharp words had restored to comparative calmness, he bound up the wounds. Several in all, and any one of which seemed quite sufficient to let out a life.

After that remonstrance, Red Bergum lay silent, quiescent. There was a faint smile upon his face, and his eyes never once wandered from the face or figure of Little Puss. Whenever her soft hands touched his flesh, he shivered; but it was with pleasure, not pain.

Bad as he was, he might have been worse. Many his crimes, and red his hands with life-blood of persons who had never done him wrong. His sins were long since past counting, and up to the hour when he fell at the feet of Little Puss, begging her to save his life, in the name of Heaven, he had been no better than a treacherous wild beast, preying on his fellows, without so much as an honest drop of blood in his veins.

But that hour changed him more than one would believe possible.

"You'll make a live of it yit!" heartily uttered Posey, when he had done all that lay in his limited power for the poor fellow.

"No I won't," smiled Red Bergum, still following Little Puss with his strangely softened eyes. "I know I've got it right whar I live. But I don't keer so mighty much. I reckon ef I croak now, it won't go so hard with me as it would ef I lived on to fergit what she's taught me! Mebbe I'd fergit—mebbe I'd go back like I was afore! It's best to git off the hooks right now. She'll think o' me as a critter who died doin' a good act, anyway!"

"We'll nurse you back to life, and never let you recall the black and bitter past," softly uttered Little Puss.

Red Bergum shook his head, with a faint sigh. "It's the whisky that's holdin' me up, an' it'll let me drop all of a heap afore long. An' that—Tell her to go in the other room," he whispered to Posey. "I've got somethin' you must know. It'd hurt her too bad! Ax her—I can't do it! It's like blottin' out the sun!"

There was a strange earnestness in his face that induced Posey to obey without questioning his motive. Little Puss turned very pale, as though with a premonition of coming sorrow, but she obeyed without a murmur, entering her chamber and closing the door behind her.

The eyes of the dying man followed her until she vanished, then he turned to Posey Curtis, motioning for the whisky flask. He swallowed a little, then spoke rapidly, like one fearful of his powers.

"I hearn 'em tellin' what was goin' on, but too late to stop 'em or to git here fu'st. I reckon they doubted ef I'd let it go on without trouble, from her savin' me, that time—an' they was right!"

"You done more'n any two men could 'a' done, and we'll never find words to thank you enough, pard," softly uttered Posey.

"It was fer her—thar's heap wuss back then you know," huskily added Red Bergum, his voice beginning to fail him. "Look out fer Lucky Barrett! Shoot him at sight, or he'll—"

Posey held the whisky to the failing man's lips, trembling with dread lest death should come before all was told. But Red Bergum rallied, and though his words came in gasps, broken and disconnected, his meaning was plain enough to the man who so breathlessly listened.

He swore that Booth Barrett was really the head of the gang of outlaws who had recently begun brisk work near Posey's Pocket, although it was not often he put on the sable mask and took the lead in person. That he left to his picked men, saying that he could work to better advantage with bare face in Posey's Pocket. It was one of these men who led the attack on the stage; another who headed the gang that rescued Red Bergum from Mark Toogood and mates. And it was his covert signs that bade the road-agents attempt to murder the bound miners, afterward.

He swore that Lucky Barrett sent this band to the lone cabin with orders to abduct Little Puss, whom he swore to marry, with or against her will. He bade them torture Posey until he confessed where his gold was hidden, and when that was in their possession, to kill him.

"When I diskivered what was up, I set out to do the best I knowed," added Red Bergum, faintly. "I come here. I see them two outside, jest as they see me. I shot one dead, an' winged the other, but not afore he plugged me clean through. Then—you know! It was fer her—all fer her! Don't let—watch Lucky Barrett! He's a born devil! He'll kill her—his touch is pizen! Watch—save—whar is she? Ef I could only see—only hear—"

Posey called Little Puss from her room, and she knelt beside the dying man, his cold and clammy hand clasped in hers. A faint smile crept over his haggard, death-lined countenance. A soft light came into his sunken eyes. They were fixed upon her face until the lids slowly drooped. Opened—drooped again. Then—

With a spasmodic strength, Red Bergum lifted his head and touched his lips to her hand, his face flushing as his head fell back, his gasping voice faintly uttering:

"I couldn't—help—God bless—"

With a grave voice Posey rose up and drew Little Puss to him:

"He's gone! Ef he lived like a wild beast, his death was that of a man! Pray fer his soul, Little Puss! Pray fer his soul as you never prayed afore! He saved you from wuss then death!"

And in that instant Little Puss knew the terrible truth!

CHAPTER XXI.

THE LOSS OF A BEARD.

THE instant the lights went out in obedience to the swift strokes of Felix Bland, Baby John Barcus fastened his mighty grip on Lucky Barrett, twisting that worthy from his feet as though handling an infant, swinging him out of the *melee*, hampering his arms with a force that would not be denied. It was the voice of Booth Barrett that rose above the tumult, only to be cut short as muscular fingers closed about his throat.

Brief as was the pause which fell over the enraged crowd, it was long enough for the big detective to reach the door with his burden, and The Man of Silk trod close at his heels. And then, as the mad row was renewed, the two men with their captive went running out of the principal street, dodging along in the shadows, avoiding all those whom the wild alarm had started toward the scene.

"Don't quite slip his wind, pard!" muttered The Man of Silk as their pace slackened, now that they were out of danger of running into those drawn toward the Wheel of Fortune. "I've got his tools, so he can't kick up much of a row, even if you do let him catch a morsel of wind once an hour or so."

Baby Barcus was spared the trouble of answering by Booth Barrett himself. Just then he threw all his powers into an effort to free himself, and as the big detective had to not only hold but carry him, the attempt came very near succeeding. Possibly it would have been successful enough to admit of the captive's raising an alarm by shouting aloud, only for a deft tap behind the ear lent him by Felix Bland.

"Looks pretty low down, slugging a man when he's held by another, don't it, pard?" he muttered, with a faint smile that showed in the moonlight. "Kick myself for that, by and by. Had to do it, though! Tell you why presently. And here we are! So good!"

As he spoke The Man of Silk paused before a small, rickety-looking shanty which had been without a tenant since its former owner shifted to more comfortable quarters not quite so far out of town. The shanty had been engaged that same evening and was now about to be put to use.

Baby Barcus followed his partner into the shanty, holding the inanimate form of Lucky Barrett in his arms until The Man of Silk closed and barred the door, then lit a light.

"Spread your load out on the table, Baby," coolly uttered Bland, a peculiar smile playing about his lips and reflected from his eyes. "I trust he hasn't croaked in good earnest, but it's just as well to catch old Time by the topknot, and it'll save trouble in the end. Dump him—so! Now you take a seat and sit down, while I make the corpus presentable, will you?"

"He isn't dead!"

"Well, I'm open to bet that he'll wish he was dead, when he begins to realize just what is in the wind; and that amounts to pretty much the same thing. Don't be so mighty particular about trifles, Baby."

The big detective dropped into a chair, watching his companion with interested eyes. Despite himself, his face would betray the deep curiosity he felt at that strange proceeding; but he said never a word after that laughing, mocking reproof.

For a few moments The Man of Silk bent over the figure on the table, holding the lamp so it cast its light full upon the white face. He seemed to be reading each line, mark and wrinkle thereon. And though Baby Barcus tried to guess whether this search proved satisfactory or displeasing, he was no whit the wiser when Felix Bland put the lamp on a shelf and set to work with nimble fingers.

A pair of bright handcuffs were snapped around the insensible gambler's wrists as they lay upon his body. A strong rope was looped around his ankles, the ends separated and passed under the table, up over his body, then knotted firmly through the link connecting the irons on his hands. Another thong passed around his middle, to be crossed over his chest and knotted. A third—this time a flexible leather strap, with buckle and tongue—was carefully fitted over the forehead, crossing and then buckled around the table-legs, holding the gambler's head as helpless, as motionless, as the rest of his person.

And then, bathing his face with strong whisky, The Man of Silk took a position where the first light of returning consciousness would fall upon his own face. A low, mellow whistle came through his lips. There was a brilliant light in his brown eyes that told Baby Barcus this was something more than a simple trick: that underneath all lay a well-developed purpose.

What could it all mean?

He was not kept much longer in suspense. With a gasping, gurgling moan, and a shiver that shook his frame from top to toe, Lucky Barrett opened his eyes, making an effort to spring to his feet, his brain apparently going back to the fight at the Wheel of Fortune.

"Don't excite yourself, my dear boy," softly, soothingly uttered Felix Bland, bending over until his face shut off view of all else for an in-

stant, and naturally drawing the gaze of his captive after him as he resumed his former erect position. "Take life calm and moderate. Avoid extremes. Rage makes the blood rush to the brain, and men have been known to drop down dead in consequence. Fear clogs up the heart in much the same manner, and—excuse me! I fear your position is not of the most comfortable?"

As the gambler appeared to recognize that smiling face, he made another desperate effort to spring up and prepare for the worst. Only to utter a low, grating curse of stupid amazement as he found himself incapable of moving a limb—of even turning his head a single degree.

"You devil!" he gasped, glaring up into that smiling face, his eyes wildly protruding, the great veins swelling on his throat and temples. "What does this mean? Who are you? Where am I?"

"It means pure business, Lucky Barrett," promptly replied The Man of Silk, as his right hand moved forward and hovered above the captive's mouth, holding a gag. "It means that unless you can curb your abominably hot temper, I'll have to make you a gift of this delightful little ornament. It means that the less you use your tongue, the better for your case when it comes before the Supreme Court; because, according to the laws and regulations made and provided to fit just such emergencies as this, I warn you that whatever you say or admit will be brought forward in evidence—ahem!"

"If this is a jest, it's an infernally stupid one!" growled the gambler, his eyes glowing redly as they stared at the bland face above him. "A dear one for you, if ever I get my hands free again."

"Thanks for the warning, considerate sir," with a low bow. "But to go back: one thing at a time, and first come, first served, with questions as with customers, it is the rule of this shop."

"Who am I? An unworthy member of a glorious profession, whose aim is to improve on nature by encouraging her where she is right, and removing her mistakes when she falls into error. In one word, a barber. And this is my establishment. And you are a customer. And you are reclining on my latest patent, a chair which, for comfort, safety, and fast-holding, has no equal in all the wide world."

"Are you crazy?" muttered Lucky Barrett, with a shiver.

"Haven't got time to discuss that question just at present, dear sir," with a brisk air, as he pulled a drawer out from under the table and took from it several articles which made the eyes of Baby Barcus open more widely than ever. "Business awful pressing. Got a call to shave the Honorable Darius Aymer and dress the hair of his lady, Adine Elmer, once Coney Kate—eh?" with an innocent glance toward the big detective. "Anything wrong with you, pard?"

Baby Barcus shook his head negatively, but his gaze grew more intense than before. Unless he was widely mistaken, he began to catch the drift of this eccentric proceeding.

The Man of Silk clicked a bright pair of shears before the eyes of his captive, smiling blandly as he added:

"Keep perfectly still, my dear sir. I wouldn't hurt you for a fortune bigger than was ever taken from the vaults of bank or—*did* you speak?" bending closer over the gambler, gazing mockingly into his eyes.

"You devil!" muttered Lucky Barrett, straining every muscle in an effort to burst his bonds; but they were by far too adroitly applied for that, and The Man of Silk made not the slightest attempt to check him, bringing the keen shears into play, deftly snip-snipping off the rich full beard.

"Great mistake, your wearing all this superfluous hair, my dear sir," he purred, while working nimbly. "Hides your fine and intelligent features! Do you know?" in a low, confidential whisper, "I begin to see that you marvelously resemble the greatest financier I ever heard of! Gentleman who made more than half a million in less than an hour, one night about three years ago! Created quite a sensation, too! One envious fellow even felt it so much that in the morning he was found dead—knocked his brains out, and then slit his throat from ear to ear, in order to make the job a certain one! Re-mark-a-ble, sir!"

Baby Barcus half-started to his feet, but sunk back again as The Man of Silk flashed a swift glance toward him. His face was white and hard-set, his eyes glowing like orbs of polished steel. But he uttered never a word, waiting and listening with bated breath.

The Man of Silk dropped his shears and snatched up a cup and brush, briskly stirring up a lather as he spoke:

"Envy is a sad failing, isn't it? Only for this wonderful financier—I'll recall his name in a moment—that poor devil might now be alive, keeping his family—wife and five kids, I believe—from starving in a poor-house. Only for him, the Hon. Darius Aymer would not now be a homeless, disgraced wanderer. Only for him,

there wouldn't be any delicious pussy-cat of a step-mother to run around the country claiming other mothers' sons. Beg pardon—opened your mouth just in time to get the hole in the way. Sorry—awfully. But won't hurt. Always use the purest and best of soaps—ask 'Don't-be-aclam Siddalls if I exaggerate in the least.'"

Rapidly the brush flew, every time Lucky Barrett opened his mouth to utter a curse or denial, slipping into the cavity with its anything but savory compound. And sweetly as the artist spoke, soft and mellow as were his tones, there was a glitter in his brown eyes that warned the gambler this was more than a mad freak. Warned him to go slow, lest worse follow.

"I beg of you to hold perfectly still, my dear sir," purred The Man of Silk, flourishing a bright razor before the eyes of his helpless victim. "Can shave a butterfly on the wing without raising a feather, as a rule, *but*—ever go on a tear? Ever try to get away with a treble lead in one trip? Then you know how the old thing works," with a sigh of relief. "Hope I won't hurt you much, but if my hand *should* slip? Be disgusting to lose a nose or an ear, wouldn't it? Make a man wish he was on a platform with a hole in it and a rope around his neck to keep him from dropping clear through while addressing an audience, wouldn't it? Never forgive myself—does the razor pull?"

Hardened though a goodly number of years in criminal-hunting had made him, used as he was to scenes of positive torture, the big detective shivered as he looked and listened. He knew now what The Man of Silk had shadowed Lucky Barrett so carefully for. He knew now what his object was. He felt that at last the real author of that sensational robbery and murder was found. But still he felt sorry for the guilty wretch.

"He's a born demon, or else he has some terrible wrong to avenge," he muttered beneath his breath as he gazed at that white, smiling face, outwardly so bland and pleasant.

Deftly The Man of Silk plied the razor, his tongue running as nimbly as the shining steel, and cutting far more keenly. Never a word did the gambler utter until Felix Bland dropped the tool and with a bit of sponge softly wiped off his face, then drew back a little, with his head cocked on one side, gazing at the wonderful alteration his loss of a beard had made.

"Never saw anything more remarkable in all my life!" he murmured, softly, rolling up his brown eyes in affected ecstasy. "Lovely as a maiden's first dream of love, I assure you, Robert Aymer!"

Sharp and incisive came that name, and as it passed his lips, The Man of Silk suddenly leaned forward, glaring into the face of his helpless captive, like one who seeks to read a mute confession there.

But Lucky Barrett only laughed, hard and viciously as he said:

"You lie if you say that is my name! As for this outrage, if you are at all in love with life, better complete your work by drawing that bit of steel across my throat; for if I ever get a hand free, I'll kill you like a cowardly cur!"

"As you murdered the watchman in the Merchants' Bank, Robert Aymer?"

"Another lie, as—Bah!" with a scornful sneer. "I'm a fool for noticing your mad ravings. If you are not crazy, then what's the use of insane asylums?"

"It's not a question of asylums, Robert Aymer, but of a scaffold and a hangman at work, with you as the subject," retorted The Man of Silk, for the first time exhibiting signs of rancor or hatred. "You have run a long course, but the end is close at hand—the end of a rope. You have left the innocent to suffer shame and suspicion and misery through all these years. You have brought the gray hairs of Darius Aymer to the very verge of the grave—you have bowed his proud heart down in the mire—you have murdered him even more brutally than you murdered that poor watchman who tried to defend his trust against midnight thieves; he died at once, while Darius Aymer has suffered a thousand times worse than death each day of all these three years! Yet, bitterly as he suffered, he could not speak the word that would clear him of all guilt in the eyes of the law! He could not bring himself to denounce the real criminal—because Robert Aymer *wash* son!"

"Which I am not!" viciously grated the prisoner. "I am not Robert Aymer. I am not that old fool's son. I never killed a watchman, nor did I rob a bank. I am Booth Barrett, and your master, if you dare to let me free for one minute by the watch!"

The Man of Silk made no immediate reply to this fierce outburst. He beckoned to the big detective, catching his hand as he rose and came forward, pointing at the face where only a pair of mustaches remained of the full beard in which the gambler had taken so much pride.

"You have not forgotten the picture that woman declared was a counterfeit of Robert Aymer, baby," he said, coldly. "Recall it as you gaze upon that face, and then tell me what you think!"

"That—by heavens!" with a sudden start as

he glanced rapidly from the face of the captive to that of the captor. "You are perfect duplicates! Face, eyes, figure and all!"

"Then I denounce *him* as the real Robert Aymer!" cried Barrett.

The Man of Silk laughed shortly, hardly, as he spoke again:

"There's one way to decide the identity of the babies, most luckily! It's a wise child that knows its own father, but I reckon Darius Aymer can pick out his son, with the choice narrowed down to us two."

CHAPTER XXII.

TURN DOWN THE LIGHTS.

"He will come, Adine? It is not another cruel jest?"

"It is past the hour, and you see there is nothing of him yet! I never believed in him—I believe in him still less now! If he is Robert Aymer, and *your* son, he is none the less a liar and a thief!"

Strangely hard and harsh the tones sounded, coming from those red lips. Harder and harsher than Darius Aymer had ever known them to utter before. And had he not been so powerfully agitated, he might well have doubted whether that voice, that hard-set, haggard face, belonged to his dainty little babyish wife.

They were seated in the bare, comfortless "parlor" on the ground floor of the Brock House: Darius Aymer, Adine and Bush Clark. Each one was paler than ordinary, and each one looked as though an important crisis was at hand: one which at least two of the trio would gladly have postponed until they could consult together.

Less than an hour before, Bush Clark first noticed some rather odd things taking place at and about the hotel. John Barcus apparently had taken matters in charge, and when he, Clark, attempted to leave the building, he was politely but firmly bidden wait a bit; that his company was urgently required in the parlor, where business of great importance was soon to be transacted. And an open note was slipped into his hand, with a request that he deliver it to Darius Aymer.

Bush Clark was no fool. He saw that the big detective had taken possession of the hotel, and that he had a goodly force of armed men on duty, who looked as though they would rather prefer a little row, as a means of enlivening the proceedings. And taking the note, he turned back, to read its contents before delivery.

That did not take long. A few lines merely; stating that at a certain hour that morning, Felix Bland would have the pleasure of calling on Mr. and Mrs. Aymer, with important tidings of their long-lost son, Robert. The bearer of the note, Mr. Clark, was also expected to be present on that occasion.

"The game's up, I reckon!" muttered Clark, to Adine.

"We'll fight it out!" was the quick response. "Our hands are clean, even if the worst comes; they can't hurt us!"

Hardly had that sharp denunciation passed the red lips of the little woman, when the door opened and John Barcus entered, followed by two men, each with a strong hand upon his shoulder, and irons about his wrists. Barcus stepped aside, the guards halted, ranging the two prisoners directly before the startled trio.

Little marvel that ejaculations of surprise, almost awe, broke from their lips as they stared at the two captives. Face, figure, color, dress and all exactly alike! Two Felix Blands! Two Men of Silk!

"Can you pick out your son, Robert Aymer, from these two men, Mr. Aymer?" asked the big detective, keenly watching the faces of the startled trio. "If you can, pray oblige me by so doing."

Instead of replying, the old man shivered and shrunk back, covering his face with his trembling hands. Terribly as he had suffered, now that he saw his son, the real criminal, in irons, he could not utter the words that might send him to the scaffold. After all, he was his son!

With a rapid motion one of the twain flung aside his irons and stepped forward, leaving the other still under arrest. As he did so the door opened again and a man with his right hand in a sling stepped across the threshold, shrinking just a trifle as the man under guard flashed a swift, fierce glance toward him.

"Marion Winston, you can point out the man who has been masquerading as Booth Barrett?" coldly asked John Barcus.

"That is the man," pointing with his sound hand to the man under guard. "I can swear to his identity, despite his loss of beard, for I have known him a number of years. I have seen him thousands of times when he wore no beard; when he looked as he does now."

"You knew him three years ago, then?" asked The Man of Silk.

"I did."

"You knew him while in Chicago?"

"I did."

"You remember the robbery of the Merchants' Bank?"

"I had ought to remember it," with a slight faltering of voice. "I was there. I took part in that robbery. I saw the watchman killed."

"And the man who killed him?"

The witness slowly lifted his hand until it pointed direct at the white face of the prisoner. And his voice was cold and distinct as he answered the question in words as well:

"There he stands, as I hope for mercy in the future! I swear that he planned the robbery; that he led us to the house of the cashier; that he found the keys and opened the bank vault; that he knocked the watchman down with a billy, from behind, and, to make all certain, cut his throat from ear to ear!"

"Spare him—mercy!" gasped Darius Aymer, sinking upon his knees almost at the feet of the accused. "Mercy! he is my boy—my poor, poor boy! Oh, Robert—"

With a grating curse the prisoner drew back his foot and aimed a brutal kick at the sobbing old man; and only the quick hand of The Man of Silk foiled his purpose. One thrust sent the wretch reeling backward, and then the old man was lifted to his feet. Strong arms encircled his trembling form. A bright, yet grave face looked into his. And a clear, mellow voice uttered:

"Father! will you forgive your willful son? May I come back to your heart and try to make amends for all that you have suffered? Can you forgive me for denying you so often? I feel that you will when I have explained the reasons for so acting! Father?"

"Robert—my boy!" gasped the old man, drawing back his head until he could gaze into that laughing, yet tear-stained face: only for an instant; then his last doubts were solved, and with a glad, choking cry he murmured: "At last—and innocent—bless God!"

If a complete record were kept of all that was said that bright morning, it would double the length of the story I set out to tell. Much must be left to the intelligence of the kindly reader, but the main points may be briefly bunched together.

"The Man of Silk" was indeed Robert Aymer, though he had not worn the last name since his flight from home, years before. Still, he had never forgotten father nor home, and though for a time he lost track of his movements, he heard of the tragedy in Chicago, and at once set about solving the mystery which he could not but feel enveloped the affair.

For obvious reasons he kept his identity a secret while working on the case, and as his suspicions were directed toward Coney Kate and Horace Miller as the real criminals, he avoided his father, and when circumstances did throw them together, he denied his identity lest the guilty ones take the alarm and flight at the same time.

Until that interview with Darius Aymer and Adine, he believed the false brother and sister were the criminals; until that day he did not even dream that suspicion rested upon his shoulders. But, as Darius Aymer told the real story of the robbery, a flash of light came into his brain, and he felt that at last the mystery was as good as solved.

More than once while circulating among the criminal class, working up a case against Miller and Coney Kate, he had been mistaken for one Varley Kahn, whom he soon discovered to be a criminal of note, "wanted" for more crimes than one. And the better to perfect his plans, he had accepted the title, and found it a passport through many an ugly den.

This memory came back to him as he listened to the story told by Darius Aymer, and only for the presence of Adine, whom he still suspected of being engaged in the plot, he would have admitted his identity, and denounced the probable sinner. As it was, he meant to find Booth Barrett and arrest him as the criminal, when he was stunned and carried to the road-agents' den, in mistake for Dr. Sanderson.

It will be remembered that when he forced the crippled chief to escort him to safety, Baby John Barcus claimed the outlaw, saying that he wanted a little talk with him. And during that talk, The Man of Silk found out that Booth Barrett was the head of the outlaw gang. And when Barcus was through with his inquisition, he took it up, alone with the outlaw. He promised him immunity and freedom if he spoke the whole truth; then pressed him hard and persistently, finally learning all that has been shadowed forth here.

This accounts for the persistent manner in which Lucky Barrett was shadowed on that evening, when he departed so far from his usual manner—a cunning scheme to enable him to prove an alibi when the murder of Posey Curtis and the abduction of Little Puss was discovered.

That was another scheme which the crippled outlaw fully explained. Lucky Barrett believed, with many another, that Posey Curtis had an immense fortune concealed somewhere, the result of his prospecting, for it was public property that Posey had taken a fortune out of his "Pocket" before it was invaded by others. He first sought to gain this by marrying Little Puss, but when she refused to elope with him, vowing that she would never be his without her father's consent, he plotted to have the old man removed from his path. If possible, the gold

was to be discovered through torture. If that failed, Posey was to be killed, and Little Puss taken to a designated spot, where Lucky Barrett was to rescue her, at the "great peril of his life!" Then she would be easily won, and the treasure with her.

While this complicated skein was being untangled, Posey Curtis and Little Puss came into town, seeking a surgeon for the broken arm. The story of the attack and rescue spread like wildfire, and was not long in reaching the ears of The Man of Silk and John Barcus. After a hasty consultation they decided that Posey should be told all, and at once visited him for that purpose, but only to discover that he knew all they could tell him on that point, thanks to Red Bergum.

They briefly gave him to understand that Lucky Barrett would never trouble him again, then took their departure.

That evening Darius Aymer missed Adine, and gently, tenderly, his son told him all, concealing nothing. He told him that Coney Kate was a wife when she married him—that the pretended "brother" was in reality her husband—that her "heroic sacrifice" on the witness-stand was but part of their cunning scheme to get hold of the money stolen from the Merchants' Bank, believing him the prime mover in that crime.

He told him how John Barcus, recognizing the pair as criminals, and suspecting them of having a finger in that robbery, had eavesdropped their private talk after the interview with "The Man of Silk," noting down in shorthand their very words. These notes, fully written out, Robert Aymer now read to the old man.

In silence Darius Aymer listened, shivering now and then as the utter heartlessness of the woman whom he had called his wife was made clear. His head bowed and tears fell from his eyes as he heard how viciously she had advocated his being taken to a secure spot where his secret could be wrung from him by torture. But then, as the reading ended, he looked across to his son, smiling through his tears, saying:

"Let her go, Robert. She has been as my wife, and guilty though she may be, our hands must never drag her to justice. Let her go. Yesterday the loss would have slain me, but now—my son has come back to me! Come back from worse than the grave!"

It was in obedience to a whispered hint from Robert Aymer that Coney Kate and Horace Miller "skipped out" without stopping to bid Darius Aymer a last fond adieu! And as they disappeared from Posey's Pocket, so they faded out of this record.

Varley Kahn, seeing that further denial could not save him, threw off the mask he had assumed, and bent all his mind to escaping from the grip of the big detective; but in vain. He was safely guarded back to the scene of his crime, and by the aid of his former comrade, was condemned to pay the full penalty due his atrocious deed.

This he did, in time, but none of the stolen money was ever recovered. After his trial and sentence, he made full confession, stating that his share of the plunder—the lion's share—had been lost at different gaming-tables.

The trial and confession fully cleared Darius Aymer of even a suspicion of guilt. And, as Robert Aymer took the stand, telling how that marvelous resemblance had led the father to suspect his son, there were few who dared sneer at the course the cashier had pursued.

Darius Aymer was offered more than one lucrative position, but he declined them all. And with "The Man of Silk," he went back to the old home, to pass the remainder of his days.

Posey Curtis recovered quickly from his hurts, and Little Puss found consolation in nursing him. For some days Posey kept secret what had been revealed to him; but, one still, bright evening as they sat together in the doorway of the little stone cabin, Puss softly told him the story of that night interview with Booth Barrett.

"I lied to you then, daddy, for I feared you would kill him if you found out the truth. And I loved him—then!"

Posey Curtis gave a start, leaning back his head until he could gaze full into the face of the girl. She did not shrink from his eyes, though there were tears in her dark orbs as she met them. Tears, but a faint smile on her face and quivering lips.

"And now, Kitty-puss? You—bless God for that."

The one sound arm did duty for two, and for a few moments there was silence between father and child—a silence too happy for speech.

Then, slowly, with many a break, with some tears but more smiles, the whole story was told. Little Puss shivered and turned pale at times as she learned how evil had been the past of the man who had captivated her first maiden fancy, but she bore it far better than Posey had dared to hope.

"It was not love—I know that now, daddy," she murmured, her curly head resting on his

shoulder, her tear-dimmed eyes gazing over to the as yet unmarked grave where Red Bergum rested. "It was a fascination such as they say a snake can exercise over a bird. But, it seemed very real while it lasted! Until that night—until I knelt alone in my room, with you out here, listening to that poor man."

"We owe him more than I thought, then," murmured the old man, with a grateful glance toward the grave. "I wonder if he knows what mighty good he's done you an' me, Little Puss?"

"God knows," was the soft, reverent response.

"An' so shell mankind, ef they kin read plain writin' on stone, Little Puss. Part o' the gold he saved us is fer a stone to mark his grave. No matter how he lived; he died A MAN!"

THE END.

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